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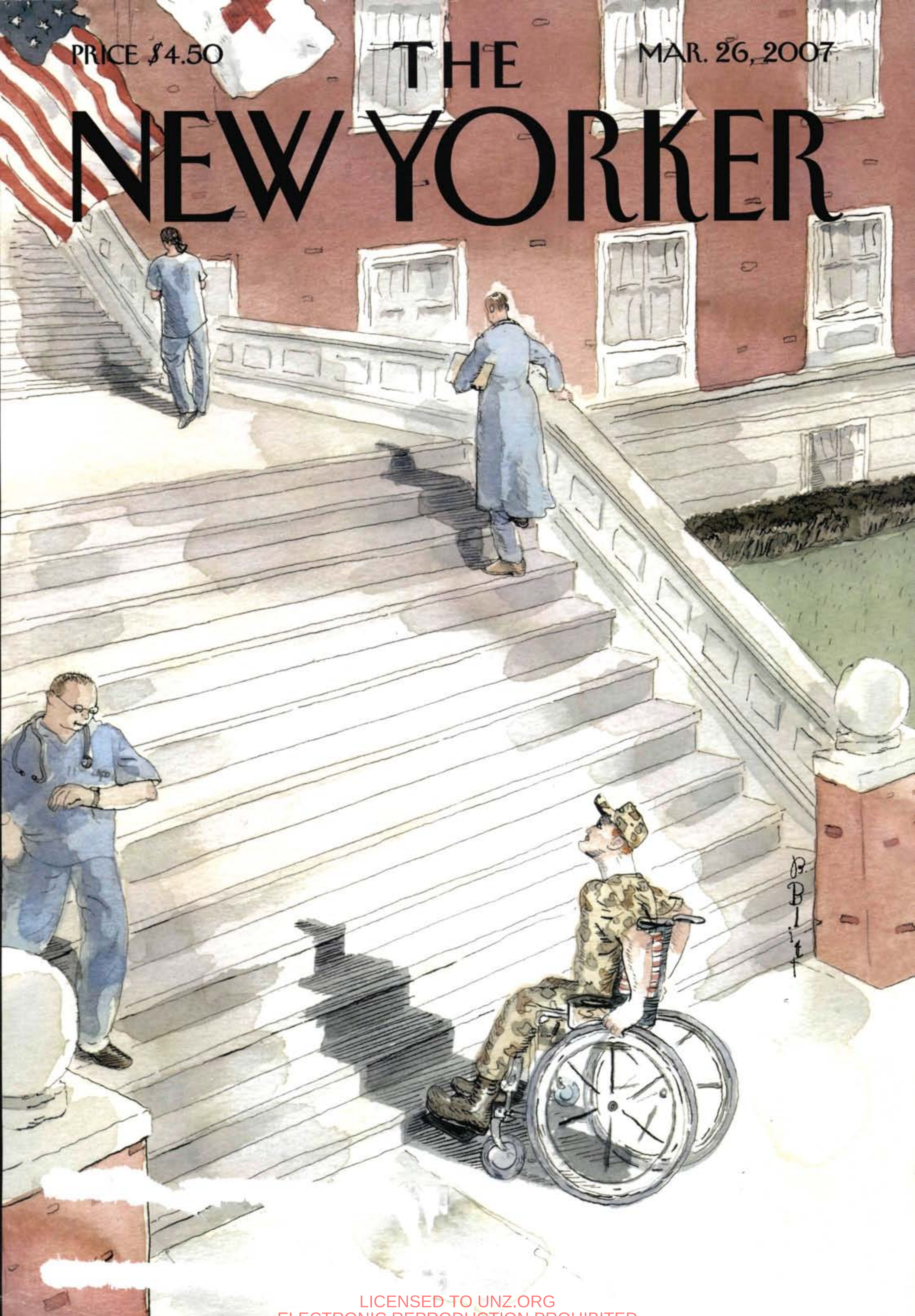
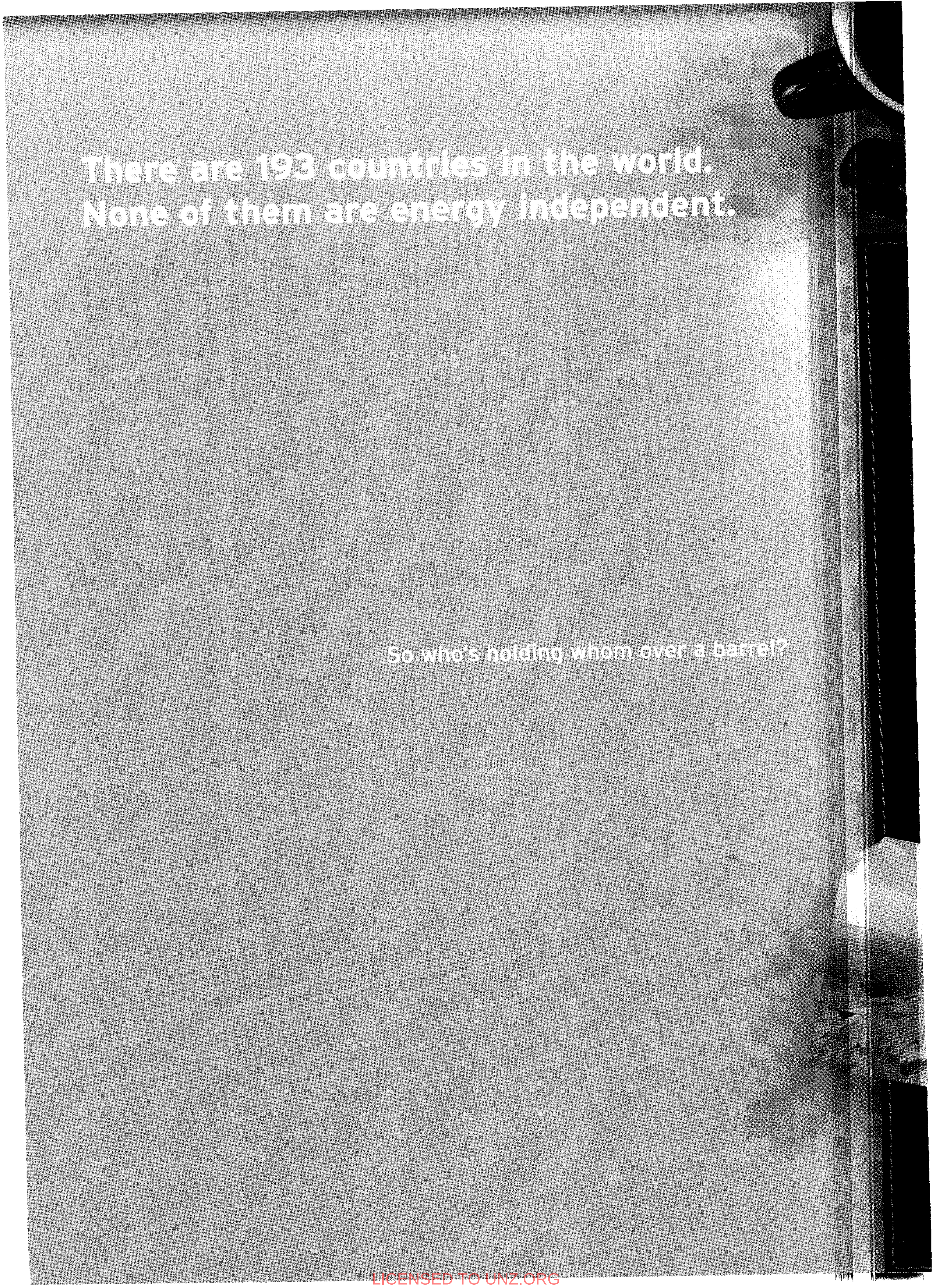
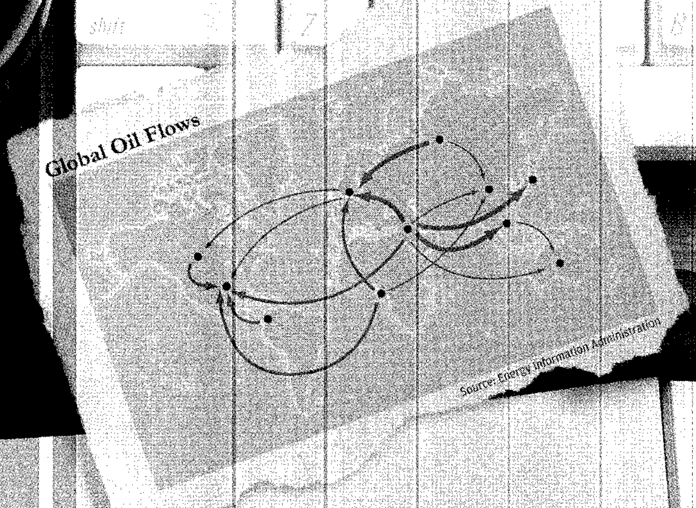



There are 193 countries in the world.
None of them are energy independent.
So who's holding whom over a barrel?



Global Oil Flows

Source: Energy Information Administration

The fact is, the vast majority of countries rely on the few energy-producing nations that won the geological lottery, blessing them with abundant hydrocarbons. And yet, even regions with plenty of raw resources import some form of energy. Saudi Arabia, for example, the world's largest oil exporter, imports refined petroleum products like gasoline.

So if energy independence is an unrealistic goal, how does everyone get the fuel they need, especially in a world of rising demand, supply disruptions, natural disasters, and unstable regimes?

True global energy security will be a result of cooperation and engagement, not isolationism. When investment and expertise are allowed to flow freely across borders, the engine of innovation is ignited, prosperity is fueled and the energy available to everyone increases. At the same time, balancing the needs of producers and consumers is as crucial as increasing supply and curbing demand. Only then will the world enjoy energy peace-of-mind.

Succeeding in securing energy for everyone doesn't have to come at the expense of anyone. Once we all start to think differently about energy, then we can truly make this promise a reality.

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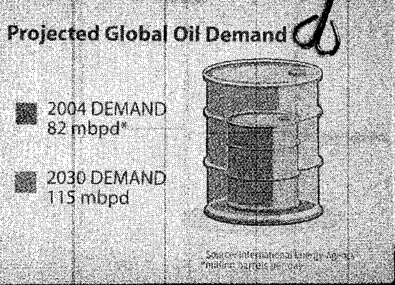
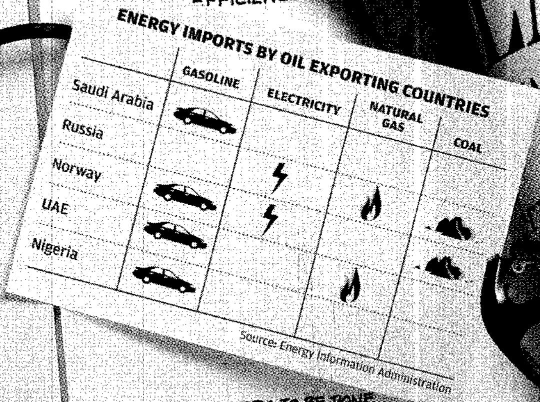


Projected Global Oil Demand

Source: International Energy Agency
*million barrels per day

OBJECTIVES

EFFICIENCIES



ENERGY IMPORTS BY OIL EXPORTING COUNTRIES

	GASOLINE	ELECTRICITY	NATURAL GAS	COAL
Saudi Arabia	🚗			
Russia		⚡	🔥	●
Norway	🚗	⚡		●
UAE	🚗		🔥	
Nigeria	🚗			

Source: Energy Information Administration

WHAT NEEDS TO BE DONE

- DIVERSIFY ENERGY SUPPLIES
  - FIND MORE TRADITIONAL FUELS
  - DEVELOP ALTERNATIVES AND RENEWABLES
- FOSTER OPEN MARKETS & TRANSPARENCY
- ENCOURAGE CONSERVATION/ ENERGY EFFICIENCY

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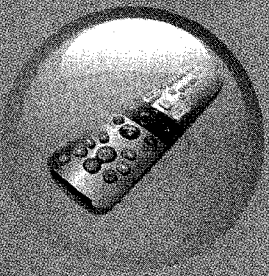

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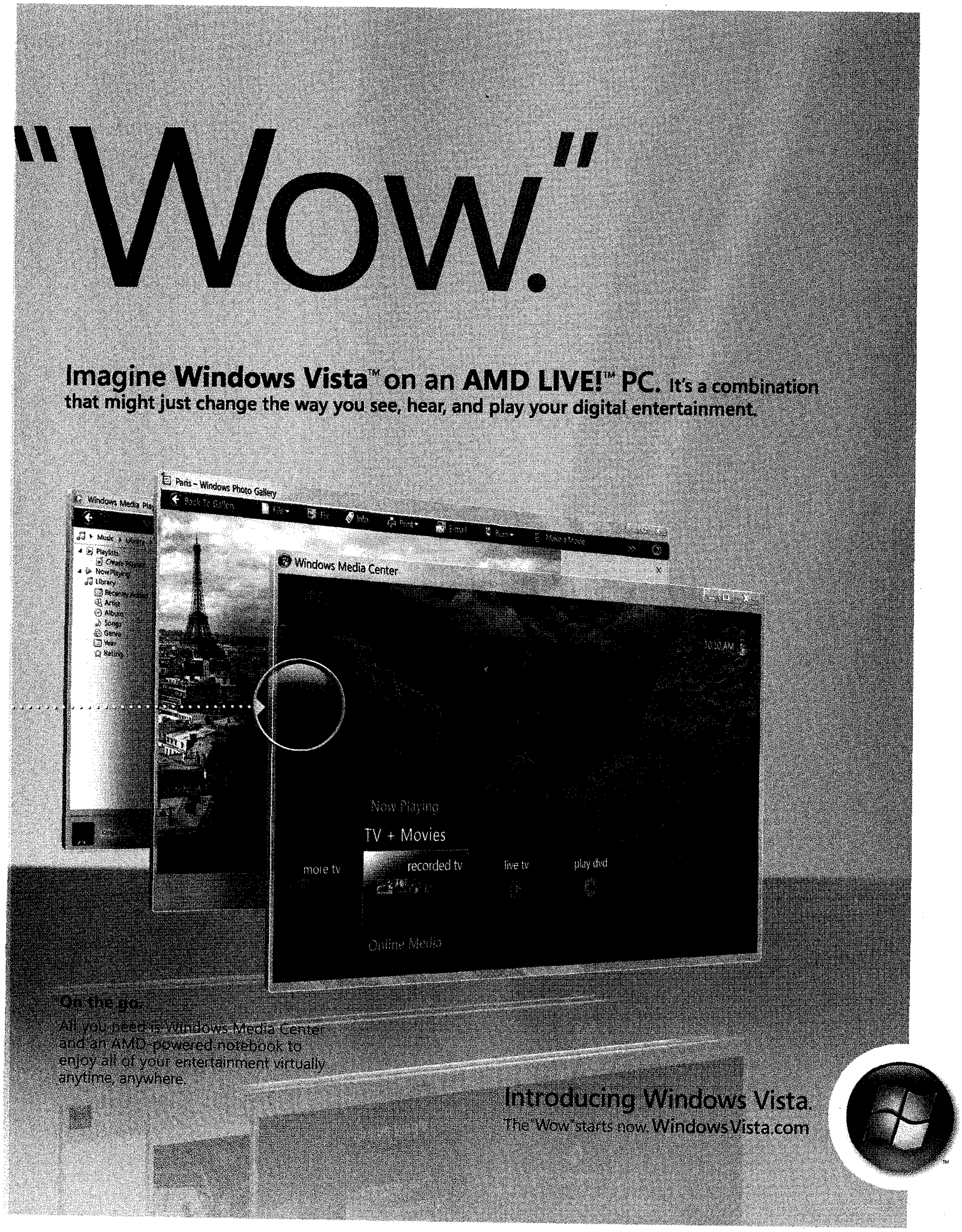
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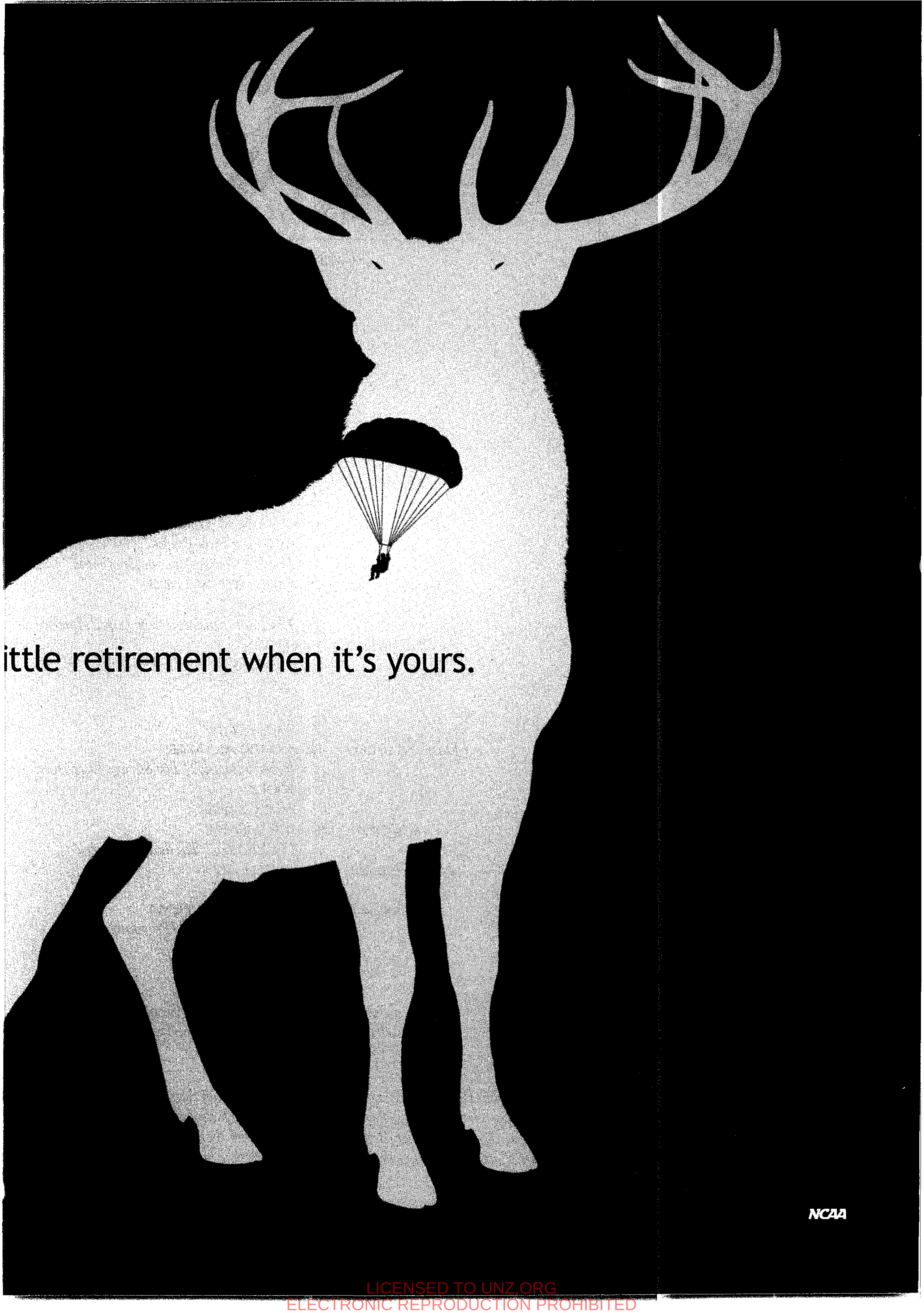
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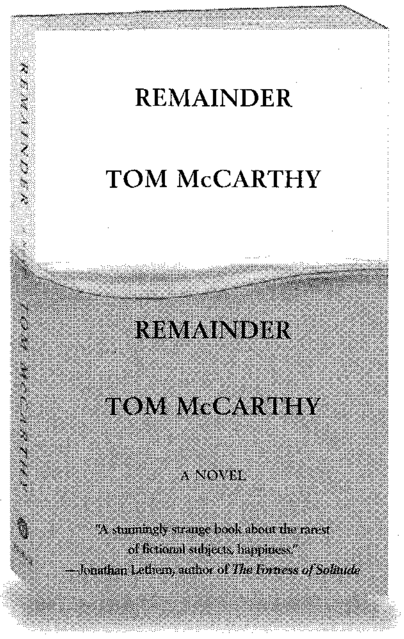
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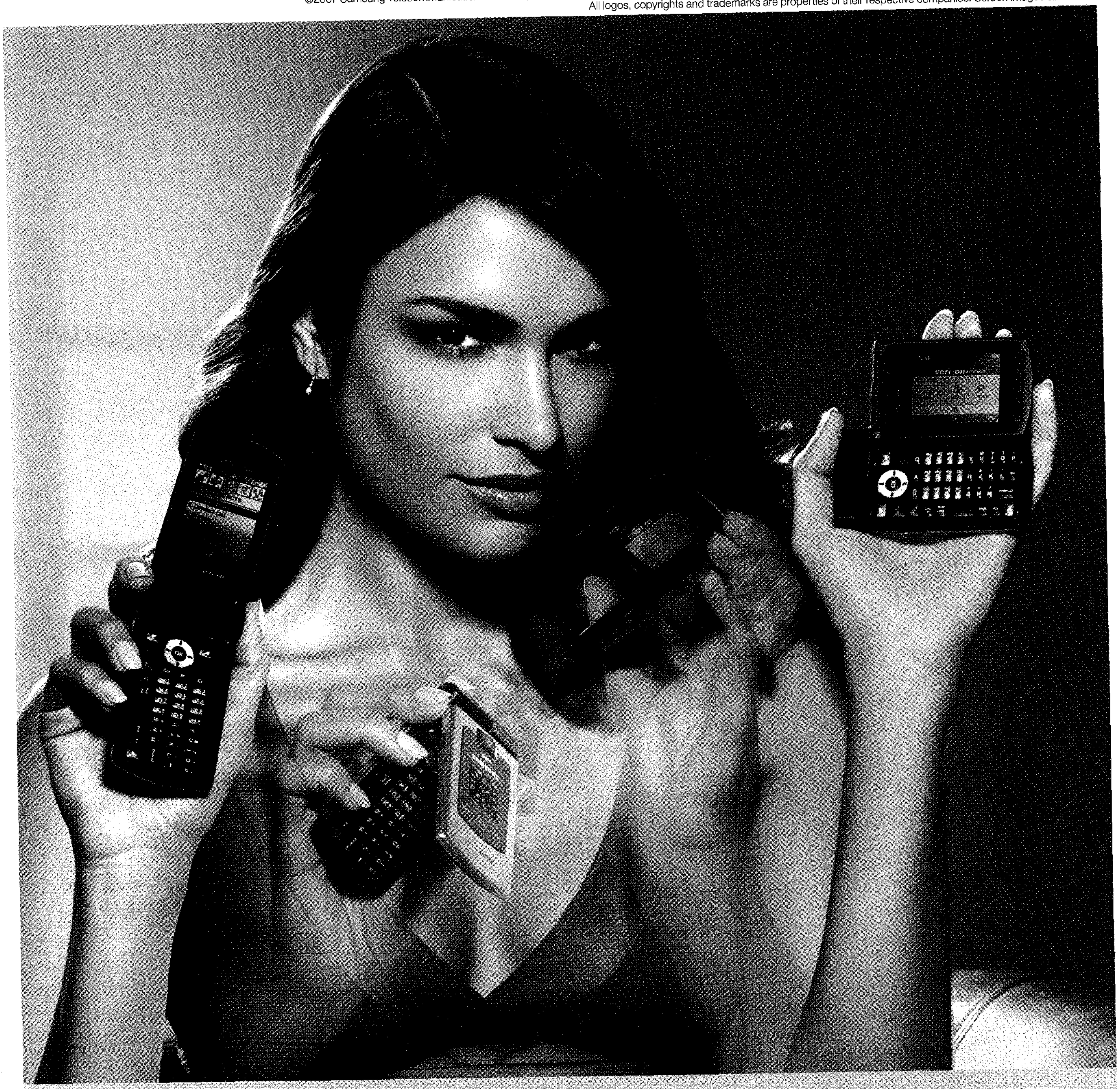

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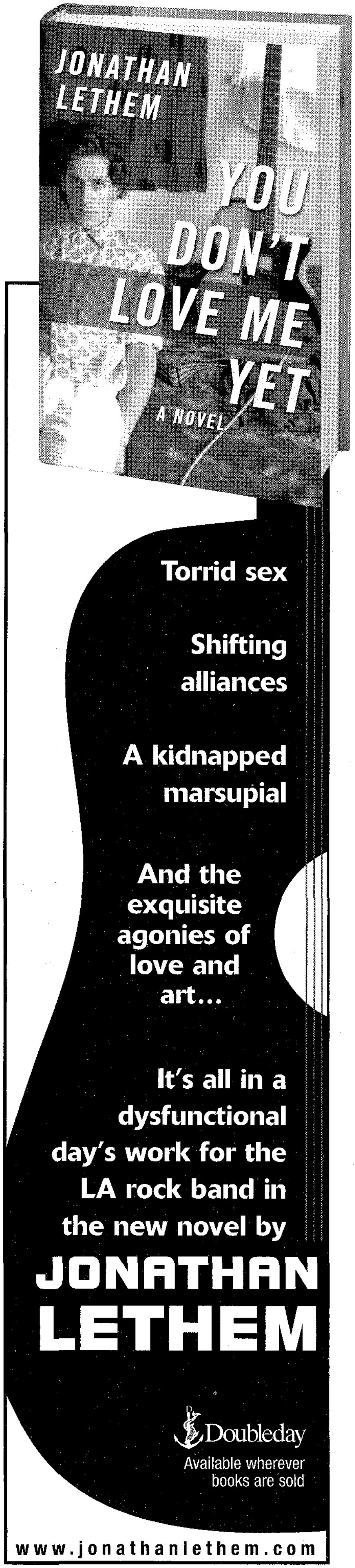

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Barry Blitt (Cover) is an artist and illustrator. He has illustrated many children's books, including "The 39 Apartments of Ludwig van Beethoven."

THIS WEEK ON NEWYORKER.COM
George Packer interviews a former Iraqi interpreter and answers readers' questions. / *Dan Baum's* daily dispatches on the effort to rebuild New Orleans. / A video excerpt from *Lawrence Wright's* one-man show, "My Trip to Al-Qaeda." / From the archives: *John Lahr's* Profile of Eddie Izzard, a *Roberto Bolaño* short story, and more. / A selection of articles from the current issue. / Video versions of animated cartoons; the cartoon caption contest; Q. & A.s, cover galleries, slide shows, and other Web exclusives; and a calendar of *New Yorker* events across the country, on our redesigned Web site.

THE MAIL

WHERE CHARITY BEGINS

Tom Monaghan's quest to spread the gospel, as described by Peter J. Boyer, is admirable ("The Deliverer," February 19th & 26th). And it is noteworthy that his effort to "die broke" was influenced by C. S. Lewis's contention that pride is "the essential vice, the utmost evil . . . the complete anti-God state of mind," and that it is pride, not greed, that spurs an already rich man to seek even greater wealth. But as Jesus admonishes the rich young man, in Matthew 19:21: "If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in Heaven." Monaghan might better serve his cause by concentrating on feeding more real people rather than by building million-dollar cathedrals in Managua and Florida.

Howard Bowman
West Bloomfield, Mich.

EMOTIONAL SCIENCE

As Larissa MacFarquhar reports, Paul and Patricia Churchland hope to replace our common notions of beliefs and feelings with more accurate descriptions of brain states ("Two Heads," February 12th). Yet, while they already sometimes speak of their own experience as a sort of fluctuating neurochemical soup, science cannot yet accurately describe experience in terms of chemical concentrations. Even if it could, why replace concise descriptions of experience with ones that are wordy, prone to error, and unclear? For example, despite Patricia Churchland's talk of her serotonin "hitting bottom," there is likely no simple relationship between short-term serotonin fluctuations and mood in the general population. (Nor do depressed people necessarily have low serotonin—a myth that owes much to the marketing of serotonin-increasing drugs for depression.) Serotonin can be seen as a slow modulator of fast networks of neurons communicating throughout the brain. It should not surprise us if the effects of such modulatory neurochemicals depend crucially on the specific patterns of neural activity, and thus defy easy summary. After all, the neuromodulator found in a glass of Chardonnay often soothes but sometimes inflames our anxiety. So, if what we really mean is that we want a glass of wine, eventually even Patricia Churchland seems to recognize that it is most effective to drop the neurobabble and ask for the drink.

Matthew Baggott
Berkeley, Calif.

WITHOUT A DRAFT

Adam Gopnik, in his comments on the concept of total war, acknowledges the importance of the institution of the conscript army as suggested by General Rupert Smith (Books, February 12th). Gopnik then ends his discussion with this observation about the current war in Iraq: "One of the things that will surely strike future historians about our era is the odd placidity of American cultural life at the time of a wildly unpopular war . . . so different from the eruptions that attended Vietnam." In spite of some similarities, one of the main differences between Vietnam and Iraq is the presence of the draft in the former and its absence in the latter. Without universal conscription, the current war just doesn't cut as wide a swath in the public's consciousness, and I can't help but believe that this was one of the unstated motivations for ending the draft after Vietnam. In a democracy, an army made up of citizens from across the social spectrum serving for relatively short terms of duty becomes much harder to sustain in a wrong-headed war than one composed solely of volunteers.

Thomas Peterson
Santa Monica, Calif.

•

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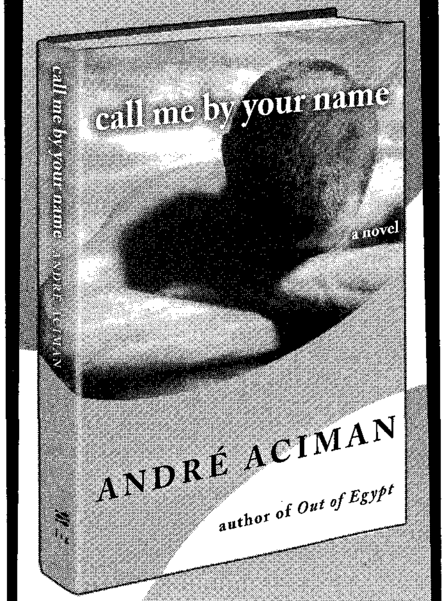

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GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN

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THIS WEEK

THE THEATRE
MY SO-CALLED LIFE

New York Theatre Workshop concludes its season with "All the Wrong Reasons," a stage memoir written and performed by John Fugelsang, a former co-host of "America's Funniest Home Videos" and a recurring VH1 commentator. Fugelsang talks about his parents (an ex-nun and an ex-friar), getting busted for smuggling medical marijuana, and the time he squared off against a neo-Nazi on "Politically Incorrect with Bill Maher." (See page 13.)

NIGHT LIFE
GLOBAL GUITAR

Rodrigo y Gabriela are two accomplished rock guitarists from Mexico who went acoustic and moved to Ireland a few years ago, and have since conquered Europeans' hearts with their up-tempo originals and reconstructions of classics like "Stairway to Heaven." They'll play Webster Hall. (See page 16.)

ART
LADIES FIRST

The Brooklyn Museum of Art's new Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art opens this week, and, along with the highly publicized permanent installation of Judy Chicago's "The Dinner Party," the inaugural shows will be "Global Feminisms," an international survey of feminist art, and "Pharaohs, Queens, and Goddesses," the first in a projected series of exhibitions honoring the women at Chicago's party. (See page 19.)

CLASSICAL MUSIC
WHERE'S WOLF?

The Austrian Cultural Forum's sleek but tiny concert hall is just too small for the baritone Wolfgang Holzmair, who, under the Forum's auspices, offers a survey of songs by Hugo Wolf at the comparatively capacious Weill Recital Hall beginning this week. (See page 24.)

MOVIES
THE LIGHTS OF PARIS

"Cinema After May '68," at French Institute Alliance Française, concludes with Jacques Rivette's "Le Pont du Nord," in which an ex-radical is released from jail, and Jean Eustache's intimate epic "The Mother and the Whore." (See page 28.)

The opera "Lost Highway," at Miller Theatre. Photograph by Yola Monakhov.

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The Ohio State University • Columbus

Architecture Interruptus

Through April 15th • wexarts.org

This exhibition explores the architectural evolution of the Church of Saint Pierre in Firminy, France, from its initial design in the early nineteen-sixties by the seminal architect Le Corbusier, to its delay-plagued completion after nearly four decades by José Oubrerie.

The Pennsylvania State University • University Park

Academy of St Martin in the Fields guest conductor/soloist Joshua Bell

March 28th, 7:30 P.M.• cpa.psu.edu

The virtuoso violinist Joshua Bell, who has won multiple Grammys and soloed internationally with every major symphony orchestra, serves as guest conductor of the Academy of St Martin in the Fields. Bell fills the shoes of the group's founder, Sir Neville Marriner, in a program that includes Vivaldi and Brahms.

Central Michigan University • Mt. Pleasant

Stephen L. Barstow Art & Design Lecture Series

March 28th–29th (times vary) • art.cmich.edu

In conjunction with an exhibition of works by Mexican and American photographers, "Analog to Digital: Evolution or Revolution?" (ongoing through April 1st), this symposium will examine the changing landscape of photographic images. Artists will lecture and debate the pros and cons of digital images and how the new medium affects the photographic community.

The Ohio State University • Columbus

Armitage Gone! Dance

March 29th, 8 P.M. • wexarts.org

Armitage Gone! Dance performs three works by its innovative artistic director, Karole Armitage. Christened "the punk ballerina" of the nineteen-eighties, Armitage lends her own brand of kinetic dynamism to her work.

University Musical Society • Ann Arbor, Michigan

Pablo Ziegler Quintet for New Tango Claudia Acuña

March 30th, 8 P.M. • ums.org

The Argentinian pianist Pablo Ziegler, protégé of the new-tango crusader Astor Piazzolla, infuses tango rhythms into his orchestrated originals, while Chilean songbird Claudia Acuña, whose vocals are influenced by Abbey Lincoln, muses and swings.

University of Virginia • Charlottesville

Talich String Quartet

April 3rd, 8 P.M. • tecs.org

The prestigious Tuesday Evening Concert Series presents the Talich String Quartet, Europe's preëminent chamber ensemble. While the Prague-based group has long been celebrated for upholding the Czech-music legacy, tonight it performs refined interpretations of works by Mozart, Brahms, and Haydn.

University of Utah • Salt Lake City

Cirque Éloize: "Rain"

April 13th–14th, 7:30 P.M. • events.utah.edu

Quebec-based troupe Cirque Éloize creates moments on stage filled with sensuality, hope, and longing. Éloize's signature blend of haunting music, dramatic lighting, theatrics, dance, poetry and thrilling acrobatics is once again evident in its production of "Rain." In the final scene, rain flows, literally, with cascading water.

Lehigh University • Bethlehem, Pennsylvania

"Man of La Mancha"

April 17th, 8 P.M. • zoellnerartscenter.org

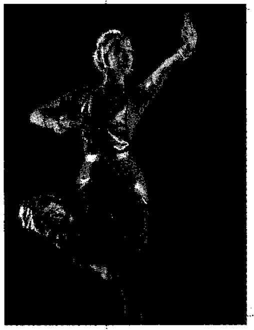
This touring production of the musical "Man of La Mancha" brings to life anew the epic quest of Don Quixote, the knight-errant famous for tilting at windmills. The original 1965 Broadway hit—a collaboration of the writer Dale Wasserman, the composer Mitch Leigh, and the lyricist Joe Darion—garnered five Tony Awards.

The Ohio State University • Columbus

Cynthia Hopkins: "Must Don't Whip 'Um"

April 19th-21st, 8 P.M. • wexarts.org

Cynthia Hopkins stars in a theatrical potpourri of songs, monologues, dance, and video that serves as the prequel to her previous work, "Accidental Nostalgia." Staged as a faux-documentary of a fictional seventies-era rocker and her farewell concert, "Must Don't Whip 'Um" was hailed by critics as a triumph.



Caltech • Pasadena

Mythili Prakash; Samputu & Ingeli

April 27th, 8 P.M. • events.caltech.edu

Headlining a captivating program of dance and music are two paramount figures from their respective cultures in India and Rwanda. Mythili Prakash stands as one of the foremost dancer/choreographers of Bharata Natyam, the classical dance style of South India. The dynamic singer and drummer Jean Paul Samputu and his Ingeli dance troupe bring African tradition to life.

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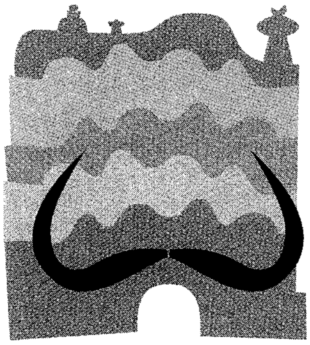


LAURIE ROSENWALD

Rough and magical Barcelona—strenuously celebrated in "Barcelona and Modernity: Gaudí to Dalí," at the Met—favors extremes. Its medieval district feels more medieval and its modern parts more modern than similar zones elsewhere. Uniquenesses, of which Antoni Gaudí's architecture is only the most startling, abound. But Barcelona's genius loci is unexportable, on the evidence of the Met show's addled mixture of fugitive regional flavors and international styles. A superb small show within the big one vivifies the turn-of-the-century scene at the Quatre Gats, a tavern where the teen-age Picasso met raffish characters including Ramon Casas, an underknown artist who wasted his talent in languid society portraiture and high living. There are enough samples of Gaudí and other seraphic architects to inspire an immediate phone call to a travel agent. But pointlessly abundant Picassos, Mirós, and Dalis advance a boosterish claim on those masters, which surely would have embarrassed them. Everybody has to come from somewhere.

—*Peter Schjeldahl*

THE THEATRE
OPENINGS AND PREVIEWS

Please call the phone number listed with the theatre for timetables and ticket information.

THE ACCOMPLICES
Bernard Weinraub's drama, presented by the New Group, is about the Revisionist Zionist Hillel Kook, who campaigned for the aid of European Jews during the Second World War. In previews. (Acorn, 410 W. 42nd St. 212-279-4200.)

ALL THE WRONG REASONS
John Fugelsang performs a one-man show, about drug smuggling, neo-Nazis, and his Catholic upbringing. Previews begin March 23. (New York Theatre Workshop, 79 E. 4th St. 212-239-6200.)

BLACKBIRD
A play by David Harrower, starring Jeff Daniels and Alison Pill, about a young woman who shows up unexpectedly at the office of her former lover. Joe Mantello directs. In previews. (City Center, 131 W. 55th St. 212-581-1212.)

CURTAINS
David Hyde Pierce plays a show-loving detective in a new musical murder mystery by John Kander and the late Fred Ebb. In previews. Opens March 22. (Al Hirschfeld, 302 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200.)

ESSENTIAL SELF-DEFENSE
In Adam Rapp's new play, a human punching bag at a women's self-defense class helps a Midwestern town defeat a mysterious evil force. Carolyn Cantor directs. In previews. (Playwrights Horizons, 416 W. 42nd St. 212-279-4200.)

THE EXILES
The director Theodora Skipitares uses masks, video, and Bunraku puppetry in this retelling of the Orestes and Electra myth. Previews begin March 22. Opens March 25. (La Mama, 74A E. 4th St. 212-475-7710.)

EXITS AND ENTRANCES
Athol Fugard's play, presented by Primary Stages, traces the author's relationship with the South African actor André Huguenet. Previews begin March 27. (59E59, at 59 E. 59th St. 212-279-4200.)

FUGUE
Judith Ivey directs a comedic drama by Lee Thuna, about a woman with amnesia and a doctor running away from his past. Opens March 21. (Cherry Lane, 38 Commerce St. 212-239-6200.)

INHERIT THE WIND
Christopher Plummer and Brian Dennehy star in Jerome Lawrence and Robert E. Lee's dramatic retelling of the Scopes trial. In previews. (Lyceum, 149 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200.)

INTRÍNGULIS
LAByrinth Theatre Company presents a solo show by Carlo Alban, an Ecuadorian immigrant who portrays a menagerie of characters. Opens March 26. (Public, 425 Lafayette St. 212-967-7555.)

LA MAGNANI
Theresa Gambacorta wrote and performs this dramatic portrait of the Italian film star Anna Magnani. Previews begin March 22. (ArcLight, 152 W. 71st St. 212-279-4200.)

THE PIRATE QUEEN
A new musical by Alain Boublil and Claude-Michel Schönberg ("Les Misérables"), based on the story of the sixteenth-century Irish chieftain Grace O'Malley. In previews. (Hilton, 213 W. 42nd St. 212-307-4100.)

PROMETHEUS BOUND
David Oyelowo plays the overreaching god in the Aquila Theatre Company's production of the Aeschylus drama. Opens March 21. (Classic Stage, 136 E. 13th St. 212-352-3101.)

SOME MEN
Terrence McNally's new play follows the reminiscences of the guests at a gay wedding. Directed by Trip Cullman. In previews. Opens March 26. (Second Stage, 307 W. 43rd St. 212-246-4422.)

THE YEAR OF MAGICAL THINKING
Vanessa Redgrave stars in Joan Didion's stage adaptation of her memoir, a reflection on grief and survival, written after the death of her husband, John Gregory Dunne. David Hare directs. In previews. (Booth, 222 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200.)

NOW PLAYING

BE
At the shabby-chic Union Square Theatre, the Israel-based company Mayumana mounts a bland variety show that is reminiscent of both "Stomp" and the Blue Man Group's "Tubes" but not half as entertaining. Throwing in belly dancing, flamenco, garter belts, water tanks, black lights, beat-boxing, thumping music, scuba fins, and frying pans does little to elevate the atmosphere, which smacks of a floor show at a foreign hotel. Eylon Nuphar and Boaz Berman direct. (100 E. 17th St. 212-505-0700.)

BLINDNESS
A doctor's wife is the only person who can see in a town plagued by sightlessness, in Joe Tantalo's adaptation of a novel by the Nobel laureate José Saramago. (59E59, at 59 E. 59th St. 212-279-4200.)

THE CAVE DWELLERS
William Saroyan's 1957 drama is about a group of outcasts who create a second home in a run-down theatre. (Pearl, 80 St. Marks Pl. 212-598-9802.)

CHICKEN
There's a gritty, street-smart humor in Mike Batistick's play about three neighborhood pals—and one unhappy spouse—who end up grooming a sickly rooster for an illegal cockfight in the Bronx. The good-hearted Wendell (E. J. Carroll) and his pregnant wife (a pitch-perfect Sharon Angela) are sharing their cluttered living room with Floyd (Michael Imperioli, of "The Sopranos"), a small-time bully without a conscience. With the rooster joining the party, the place gets truly overcrowded, and aggressions are unleashed. Nick Sandow's production goes for the jugular, but whenever it abandons its overt menace it taps into a satisfying undercurrent of dry comedy. (Studio Dante, 257 W. 29th St. 212-868-4444.)

DEFENDER OF THE FAITH
Stuart Carolan's drama is set in nineteen-eighties Northern Ireland, where an investigator for the I.R.A. is on the trail of an undercover informer. (Irish Repertory Theatre, 132 W. 22nd St. 212-727-2737.)

HAMLET
The Wooster Group's adaptation, directed by Elizabeth LeCompte, is derived from Richard Burton's "Theatrofilm" version, from 1964. (St. Ann's Warehouse, 38 Water St., Brooklyn. 718-254-8779. Through March 25.)

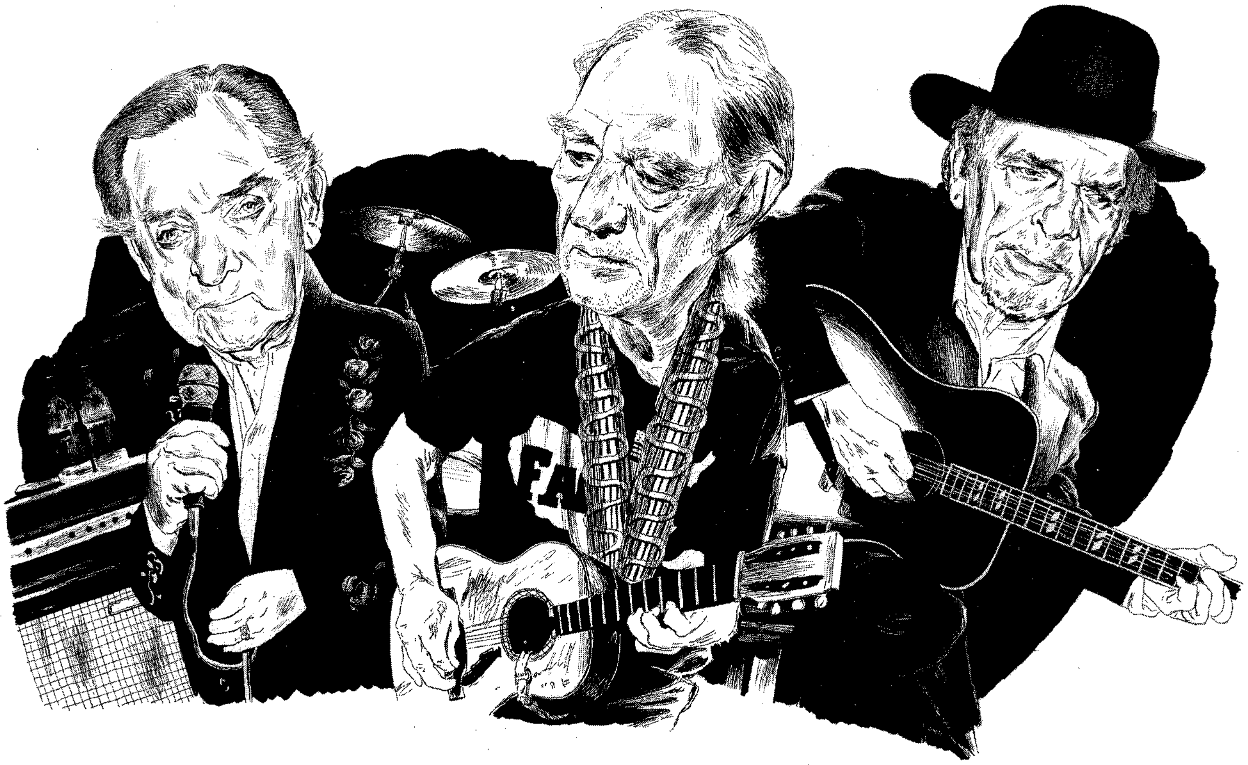
HOWARD KATZ
As the eponymous hero of Patrick Marber's comedy, Alfred Molina plays an agent who has lost everything. He is spiritually bereft, adrift, a tough guy with nothing but memories to sink his teeth into. Through flashbacks, we see him in his office, telling his clients to fuck off, abusing his secretary, and becoming more than a little overwhelmed by the plaintive demands of his wife (the always great Jessica Hecht). As a play, "Howard Katz" feels only half written—one cannot help wondering ultimately what the point of it is—but Molina fills the stage with his almost absurd passion for performance. (Reviewed in our issue of 3/19/07.) (Laura Pels, 111 W. 46th St. 212-719-1300.)

JACK GOES BOATING
LAByrinth Theatre Company stages a play by Bob Glaudini, about dating, drugs, and betrayal. The cast includes Philip Seymour Hoffman and Daphne Rubin-Vega. (Public, 425 Lafayette St. 212-967-7555.)

KING HEDLEY II
Derrick Sanders's staging of one of the most sprawling of August Wilson's Pittsburgh plays unearths some of its heartbreak and poetry but falls short of scaling its tragic heights. Nonetheless, there is pathos in a pregnant thirty-five-year-old grandmother's lament for her decrepit neighborhood, blighted by bullets and Reagan-era decay, and urgency in the outbursts of the unemployed ex-convict King (Russell Hornsby), who hustles refrigerators and

dreams of owning a video store. King believes he can change his life; he doesn't see that he's yet another pawn of this neighborhood's harsh, remorseless gods. (Peter Norton Space, 555 W. 42nd St. 212-244-7529.)

KING LEAR
As the star of James Lapine's production, Kevin Kline performs brilliant duets with the sweet and arresting Philip Goodwin, who plays the Fool. Their relationship eclipses all others here; we care little about Goneril's and Regan's struggles, and we barely notice Cordelia (Kristen Bush) and her steady effort to counteract her sisters' capitalist greed with a kind of humane socialism. Lapine is right to bring Lear's relationship with the Fool to the forefront: Kline's strengths lie in the delicate, the quiet, and the intimate moments, not in Lear's more bombastic scenes. But, by relegating the various subplots to the margins, Lapine turns most of the other characters into mere figures in a shadow play. (3/19/07) (Public, 425 Lafayette St. 212-967-7555. Through March 25.)



Ray Price, Willie Nelson, and Merle Haggard bring their "Last of the Breed" tour to Radio City Music Hall this week.

ANDY FRIEDMAN

MY TRIP TO AL-QAEDA
Lawrence Wright, a staff writer for this magazine, performs a theatrical companion piece to his book "The Looming Tower: Al-Qaeda and the Road to 9/11." (Culture Project, 55 Mercer St. 212-352-3101.)

OUR LEADING LADY
Manhattan Theatre Club presents a play by Charles Busch, about the actors who performed at Ford's Theatre on the night of Lincoln's assassination. Lynne Meadow directs. (City Center, Stage II, 131 W. 55th St. 212-581-1212.)

PRELUDE TO A KISS
The first act of Craig Lucas's 1990 romantic fable, now in revival at the Roundabout, hangs on a perilously thin conceit: Peter (Alan Tudyk) and Rita (Annie Parisse) enter a rapid courtship; on their wedding day, Rita receives a kiss from a melancholy old man (John Mahoney) and they magically exchange bodies, à la "Freaky Friday"; and, suddenly, the woman Peter knew as Rita doesn't remember that she's read Freud, or that her father's a dentist. It's only in the second act that Lucas's play emerges as a rich and cutting parable of the cycle of life, as well as an understated examination of gender and—once Peter discovers his true bride in the form of an ailing man—the echo of an AIDS drama. (American Airlines Theatre, 227 W. 42nd St. 212-719-1300.)

STAY
The première of Lucy Thurber's story of a young writer who discovers an angel. Jackson Gay directs. (Rattlestick, 224 Waverly Pl. 212-868-4444.)

TALK RADIO
Liev Schreiber stars in a Broadway revival of Eric Bogosian's 1987 play. (Reviewed in this issue.) (Longacre, 220 W. 48th St. 212-239-6200.)

TALL GRASS
A triptych of dark comedic vignettes about relationships, by Brian Harris. Directed by Nick Corley. (Beckett, 410 W. 42nd St. 212-279-4200.)

THE TAMING OF THE SHREW / TWELFTH NIGHT
The all-male British troupe Propeller presents both Shakespeare comedies in repertory. Edward Hall directs. (BAM's Harvey Theatre, 651 Fulton St., Brooklyn. 718-636-4100.)

TEA AND SYMPATHY
Keen Company revives Robert Anderson's 1953 drama. (Reviewed in this issue.) (Clurman, 410 W. 42nd St. 212-279-4200.)

WIDOWERS' HOUSES
Epic Theatre Center sets George Bernard Shaw's 1892 drama in 1992 Harlem. (Kirk, 410 W. 42nd St. 212-279-4200.)

Also Playing

AT LEAST IT'S PINK: Ars Nova, 511 W. 54th St. 212-868-4444. **BFF:** DR2, at 103 E. 15th St. 212-239-6200. Through March 24. **A CHORUS LINE:** Schoenfeld, 236 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200. **THE COAST OF UTOPIA:** Vivian Beaumont, Lincoln Center. 212-239-6200. **COMPANY:** Barrymore, 243 W. 47th St. 212-239-6200. **GREY GARDENS:** Walter Kerr, 219 W. 48th St. 212-239-6200. **GUTENBERG! THE MUSICAL!:** The Actors' Playhouse, 100 Seventh Ave. S. 212-239-6200. **IN THE HEIGHTS:** 37 Arts, 450 W. 37th St. 212-307-4100. **JOURNEY'S END:** Belasco, 111 W. 44th St. 212-239-6200. **MARY ROSE:** Vineyard, 108 E. 15th St. 212-353-0303. Through March 25. **SPALDING GRAY: STORIES LEFT TO TELL:** Minetta Lane Theatre, 18 Minetta Lane. 212-307-7171. **SPRING AWAKENING:** Eugene O'Neill, 230 W. 49th St. 212-239-6200. **THE VOYSEY INHERITANCE:** Atlantic, 336 W. 20th St. 212-239-6200. Through March 25.

NIGHT LIFE
ROCK AND POP

Musicians and night-club proprietors live complicated lives; it's advisable to call ahead to confirm engagements.

BARBÈS
376 9th St., Park Slope, Brooklyn (718-965-9177)—March 26: **Chicha Libre,** something of a local supergroup, includes the *cuatro* player and vocalist Olivier Conan (a member of Las Rubias del Norte and also one of the owners of this club), the keyboardist Joshua Camp (of One Ring Zero), the bassist Nicholas Cudahy (formerly of Combustible Edison), and the guitarist Vincent Douglas (of Bébé Eiffel, and another owner of the club). They start with South American *chicha* music (an electrified take on folkloric *cumbia* that dates back some thirty years) and add psychedelic touches, surf rock, and extended improvisations.

B. B. KING BLUES CLUB & GRILL
237 W. 42nd St. (212-997-4144)—March 24: The soul survivor **Bettye LaVette.** With an acoustic set by the **North Mississippi Allstars.**

BEACON THEATRE
Broadway at 74th St. (212-307-7171)—March 20 and March 22-24: The **Allman Brothers** kick off a fourteen-evening stand.

GRAMERCY THEATRE
127 E. 23rd St. (212-307-7171)—March 23: **Gene Ween** (a.k.a. Aaron Freeman) is half of the skewed alt-rock duo Ween. As such, he has spent the past two decades or so crafting genre-disembowelling music combining wry parody, surreal genius, and perpetual tomfoolery. Taking a brief respite from recording Ween's next album, Gene is performing a string of solo acoustic dates. March 26: The "Metal for the Masses" tour. Named after a series of heavy-metal compilation disks available exclusively at Hot Topic (a shopping-mall chain store and hangout for sullen, black-clad teens), this road show features the Scandinavian death-metal bands the **Haunted, Dark Tranquility,** and **Scar Symmetry,** along with **Into Eternity,** who hail from Canada.

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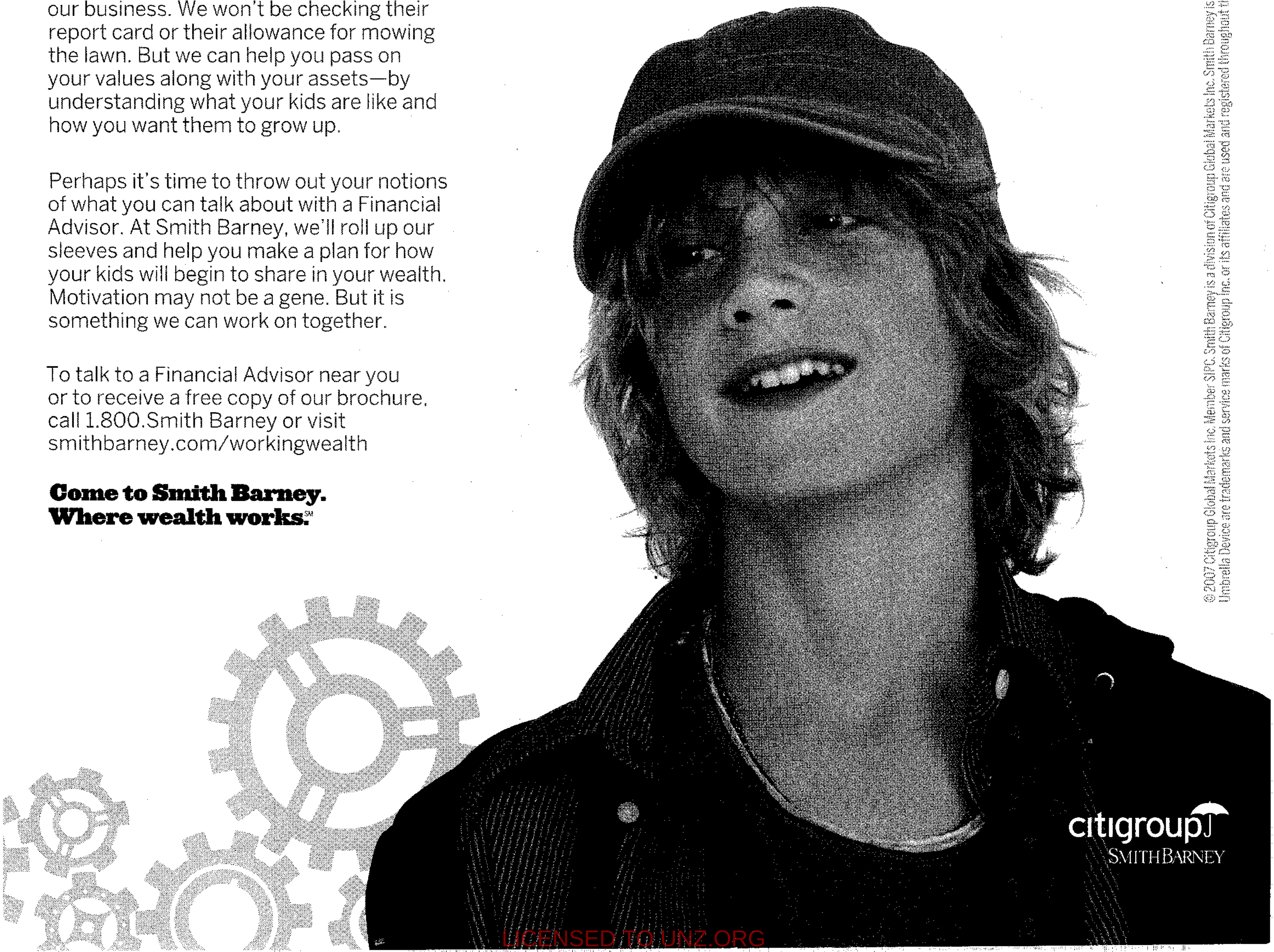

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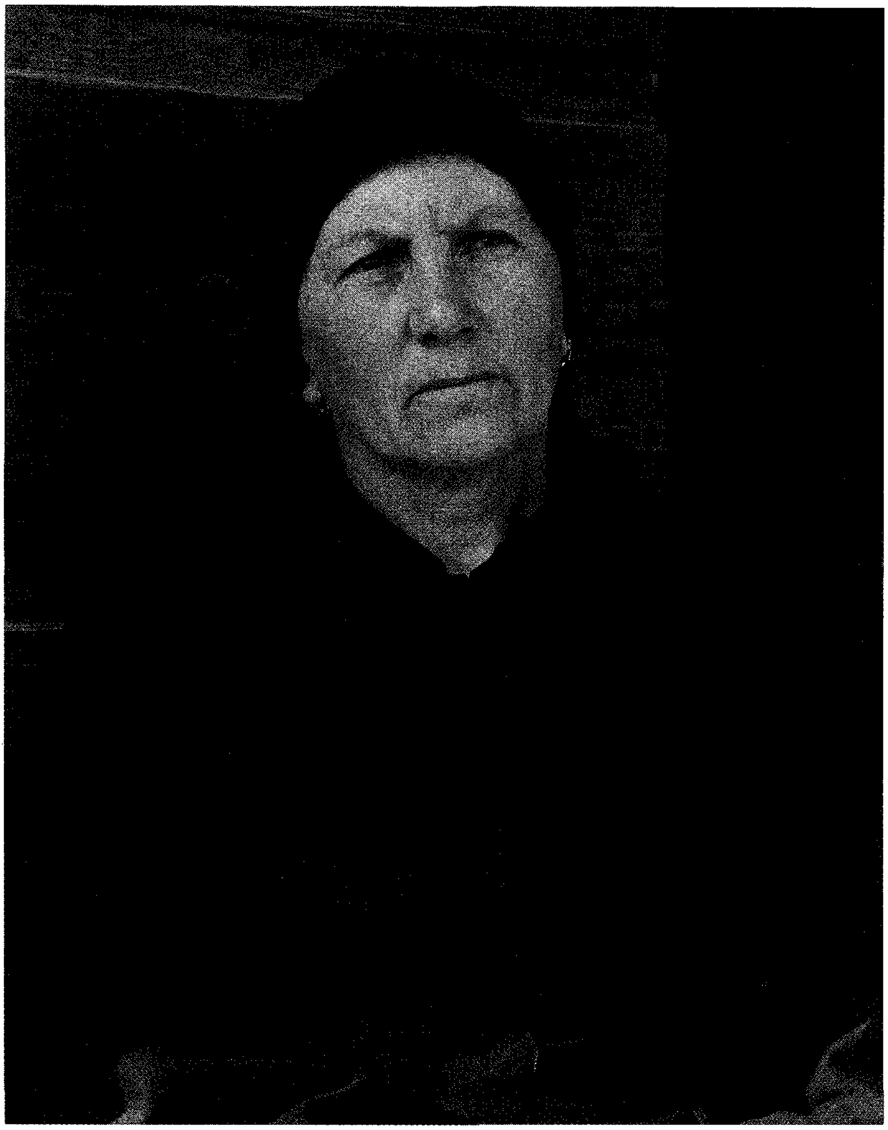
LUNA LOUNGE
361 Metropolitan Ave., Brooklyn (718-384-7112)—March 20: The **Young Knives** (see the Mercury Lounge). March 23: **Maplewood,** Brooklyn's premier California-rock band, has been lying low lately, but that doesn't mean its fortunes have been static. One of its songs, "Indian Summer," is on the new comeback album by the chart-crushing seventies soft-rockers America, "Here & Now." Encouraged by the fact that one of their idols is covering their music, they're back onstage and back at work on a new album. With the good-time sounds of the faux-French rockers **Les Sans Culottes** and the experimental alternative-rock songs of **Thomas Simon–Musicien Sans Frontiéres,** which is fronted by the Viennese-born composer and filmmaker Simon and his wife, the singer and actress Jillie Simon.

MERCURY LOUNGE
217 E. Houston St. (212-260-4700)—March 22-23: Practicing an infectious brand of singularly Scottish indie rock, the **Fratellis** are a much fêted new trio who pair sweetly accessible pop hooks with libidinous post-adolescent lyrics. Also on March 22: The arch English threesome the **Young Knives** play brash post-punk with a wry sense of humor.

NEW YORK SOCIETY FOR ETHICAL CULTURE
2 W. 64th St. (212-874-5210)—Before the Indigo Girls and the Dixie Chicks came along, the **Roches** pretty much owned the female-harmony turf. But Maggie, Terre, and Suzzy have performed less and less as a trio recently; their new release, "Moonswept," is their first record together in ten years. The Jersey sisters' gorgeous vocal intertwining, served with wit and heart, will be the order of the night on March 23.

RADIO CITY MUSIC HALL
Sixth Ave. at 50th St. (212-247-4777)—March 22: The "Last of the Breed" tour unites the country-music legends **Merle Haggard, Willie Nelson,** and **Ray Price.** With a combined century and a half in the business, the three know more about the genre's roots than any other musicians alive today. They recently spent a couple of days together recording a double album of country classics, also dubbed "Last of the Breed," and this show will feature songs from it, as well as renditions of each of the three singers' old hits. Haggard, ever the rebel, also has a new song, "Hillary," which he's been performing in concert. It includes the lines "This country needs to be honest / Changes need to be large / Something like a big switch of gender / Let's put a woman in charge." March 23: The Louisiana native **Lucinda Williams** returns. Williams has long incorporated a wide range of musical styles into her repertoire—from folk to blues to country to rock. Her new record, "West," is heavy on the production (Hal Willner manned the dials); in concert the new material should have a chance to come alive. With the **Heartless Bastards.** Erika Wennerstrom, a petite woman with a cavernous voice, leads this high-voltage trio from Cincinnati in overpowering blues-rock originals.

SIN-É
150 Attorney St. (212-388-0077)—March 22: **Just Jinjer,** South Africa's top-selling alternative-rock group (which translates as just under a quarter of a million units moved), recently relocated to Southern California, the better to bring its middle-of-the-road, mildly humanistic anthems to America. With a track record such as theirs (they've also opened around the world for the likes of U2, Stevie Wonder, and Def Leppard), they can reasonably be expected to blow the roof off this small Lower East Side room, which is planning to close its doors for good early next month.



Paul Strand's "The Mayor's Mother, Luzzara, Italy" (1953), at Pace/MacGill.

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THEATRE AT MADISON SQUARE GARDEN
Seventh Ave. at 33rd St. (212-307-7171)—March 26: **Snow Patrol.** Taking their cues from such cloying successes as Coldplay, Travis, and Keane, this Scottish band packages its passions in doe-eyed anthems full of histrionic platitudes and plangent guitar theatrics. Cynics need not attend.

TONIC
107 Norfolk St. (212-358-7503)—March 24: The Brooklyn-based collective **Flaming Fire** is more like an evangelical church congregation than like a conventional rock group, with its leader, Patrick Hambrecht, in the role of preacher and the other members (including his wife, Kate) as his loyal followers. The group's songs pair deceptively simple Residents-like riffs and occasional bursts of noise with fearsome, Biblical-sounding group chants and call-and-response singing. Most refreshing are Hambrecht's seriousness and fervor. (The band's sense of irony is limited to the darker variety—"Kill the right people," one refrain goes.) With the Kings County ensemble **Barbez,** whose gothic cabaret takes listeners deep into the imaginary recesses of Eastern Europe.

WEBSTER HALL
125 E. 11th St. (212-353-1600)—March 21: **Rodrigo y Gabriela** are highly versatile guitar players, originally from Mexico. The two started off in a heavy-metal band in Mexico City, but they went acoustic shortly before they moved to Ireland, in 1999. Their mixture of jazz, flamenco, and folk styles is made all the more compelling by the occasional Metallica song.

WORLD MUSIC INSTITUTE
March 24: The traditional Irish sounds of **Danú.** (Symphony Space, Broadway at 95th St. For more information, call 212-545-7536.)

JAZZ AND STANDARDS

ALGONQUIN HOTEL
59 W. 44th St. (212-840-6800)—March 20-April 14: The irrepressible cabaret team of **KT Sullivan** and **Mark Nadler** salute the legendary songwriting partnership of Betty Comden and Adolph Green. Expect such treasures as "Just in Time," "The Party's Over," "Some Other Time," and "Lonely Town" to get a thorough workout.

BIRDLAND
315 W. 44th St. (212-581-3080)—March 21-24: The **Final Four.** The band's name may be slightly shaky (it's a reference to the college basketball playoffs), but its musical pedigree is solid. The saxophonist **Javon Jackson,** the pianist **Steve Kuhn,** the bassist **Buster Williams,** and the drummer **Al Foster** make up this promising quartet.

BLUE NOTE
131 W. 3rd St., near Sixth Ave. (212-475-8592)—March 20-25: A neo-fusion lovefest, as the bassist **Stanley Clarke** leads a trio with the drummer **Lenny White,** a former bandmate of his from the Return to Forever days, and the keyboardist **Patrice Rushen.**

DIZZY'S CLUB COCA-COLA
Broadway at 60th St. (212-258-9595)—March 21-25: **Gloria Lynne** may always be remembered for the 1964 hit ballad "I Wish You Love," but recent activity on the jazz-club circuit has reëstablished her as anything but a nostalgia act.

FAZIOLI SALON
Klavierhaus, 211 W. 58th St. (212-245-4535)—The Brooklyn-based composer **Rob Schwimmer's** primary means of expression are the piano and the theremin. He's worked with everyone from Wayne Shorter to Queen Latifah, and recently backed Simon and Garfunkel on tour. His own work veers

from the otherworldly (see theremin, above) to the classical- and jazz-infused. On March 28, he sits down at the Fazioli grand in this piano store's intimate back room, performing solo selections from his new release, "Beyond the Sky."

IRIDIUM
1650 Broadway, at 51st St. (212-582-2121)—March 21-25: As long as the drummer **Steve Smith** remains in the fight, old-school fusion will live on. His band Vital Information features the former Santana keyboardist **Tom Coster.** Mondays belong to the electric-guitar innovator **Les Paul.** The **Mingus Big Band** takes over on Tuesdays.

JAZZ STANDARD
116 E. 27th St. (212-576-2232)—March 22-25: The **Randy Weston** quartet, featuring **Billy Harper.** The pianist Weston and the tenor saxophonist Harper have been occasional collaborators since at least the late sixties. Both are muscular improvisers who enjoy nothing more than stretching out over a furious modal groove.

TONIC
107 Norfolk St. (212-358-7503)—March 25: The **Jane Ira Bloom** quartet. The adventurous soprano saxophonist Bloom gets support from the bassist **Mark Helias,** the drummer **Matt Wilson,** and the keyboardist **Dawn Clement.**

VILLAGE VANGUARD
178 Seventh Ave. S., at 11th St. (212-255-4037)—March 20-25: The **Roy Haynes** quartet. Having played drums with Lester Young, Charlie Parker, and John Coltrane, Haynes could very well rest on his laurels. Instead, he takes his role as an elder statesman very seriously, nurturing new talent and handing down the secrets of the art of leading a tight small group. The **Vanguard Jazz Orchestra** holds sway on Mondays.

ART

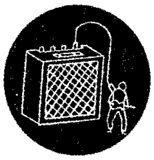
MUSEUMS AND LIBRARIES

METROPOLITAN MUSEUM
Fifth Ave. at 82nd St. (212-535-7710)—**"Barcelona and Modernity: Gaudí to Dalí."** Through June 3. ♦ **"Flowing Streams: Scenes from Japanese Art and Life."** Through June 3. ♦ **"Louis Comfort Tiffany and Laurelton Hall: An Artist's Country Estate."** Through May 20. ♦ **"Discovering Tutankhamun: The Photographs of Harry Burton."** Through April 29. ♦ **"Accordions and Harmonicas of the Nineteenth Century."** Through March 31. ♦ **"One of a Kind: The Studio Craft Movement."** Through Sept. 3. ♦ **"Closed Circuit: Video and New Media at the Metropolitan."** A sampling of works from the museum's small but growing collection of video art; among the artists represented are Ann Hamilton, David Hammons, Jim Campbell, Darren Almond, and Maria Marshall. Through April 29. (Open Tuesdays through Sundays, 9:30 to 5:30, and Friday and Saturday evenings until 9.)

MUSEUM OF MODERN ART
11 W. 53rd St. (212-708-9400)—**"Armando Reverón"** is a beguiling retrospective of a Venezuelan painter, hardly known in North America, who died in 1954. Through April 16. ♦ **"Abbas Kiarostami: Image Maker."** Through May 28. ♦ **"Artistic Collaborations: Fifty Years at Universal Limited Art Editions."** Tatyana Grosman founded the U.L.A.E. workshop, on Long Island, in 1957; in the years since, hundreds of artists—among them Susan Rothenberg, Jasper Johns, Barnett Newman, Kiki Smith, and Richard Tuttle—have made prints with the master craftsmen there. Through May 21. ♦ **"Live/Work: Performance Into Drawing."** Works on paper that relate to performance-art pieces. Through May 7. ♦ **"Jeff Wall,"** a mid-career survey of the Canadian photographer's work. Through May 14. ♦ **"Comic Abstraction: Image Making, Image Breaking."** Through June 11. (Open Wednesdays through Mondays, 10:30 to 5:30, and Friday evenings until 8.)

GUGGENHEIM MUSEUM
Fifth Ave. at 89th St. (212-423-3500)—**"Spanish Painting from El Greco to Picasso: Time, Truth, and Memory."** Through March 28. ♦ Work by Tacita Dean, the 2006 recipient of the Hugo Boss Prize for contemporary art, is on view through June 6. ♦ **"Family Pictures"** showcases contemporary photography and video depicting families and children; among the artists included are Patty Chang, Loretta Lux, Gregory Crewdson, Gillian Wearing, and Thomas Struth. Through April 16. (Open Saturdays through Wednesdays, 10 to 5:45, and Fridays, 10 to 8.)

WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART
Madison Ave. at 75th St. (800-944-8639)—**"Gordon Matta-Clark: You Are the Measure."** Through June 7. ♦ **"Lorna Simpson,"** a twenty-year survey of the artist's photographs and videos. Through May 6. ♦ Terence Koh's one-room work comprises a single four-thousand-watt bulb in a lamp pointed at viewers, a withering assault on the senses. The work is rife with metaphors, particularly of the Icarian stripe, but ultimately it's a bit short on substance. Through May 27. ♦ **"Taryn Simon: An American Index of the Hidden and Unfamiliar."** Through June 24. (Open Wednesdays, Thursdays, and weekends, 11 to 6, and Fridays, 1 to 9.)



POP NOTES

HIP REPLACEMENT

About five years ago, indie rockers began to rediscover the pleasures of rhythm. Punk funk, as it was called in the seventies and early eighties, made a return, and New York bands like the Rapture and their production team, the DFA, started making tense, repetitive dance records that drew from both disco and rock. In 2002, James Murphy, half of the DFA, released a record under the name LCD Soundsystem called "Losing My Edge," a comic monologue told from the viewpoint of a hipster who knows too much about music for his own good. "I'm losing my edge to the Internet seekers who can tell me every member of every good group from 1962 to 1978," Murphy sings. "I'm losing my edge to the art-school Brooklynites in little jackets and borrowed nostalgia for the unremembered eighties." While the DFA started getting big commissions—including an unfinished collaboration with Britney Spears—LCD Soundsystem became a real band and started playing live. And something funny happened: LCD Soundsystem turned out to be more than a joke.

Live, LCD Soundsystem is sweaty and aggressive, anything but ironic. Murphy shouts his catchphrases and plays a cowbell as if he's dreamed since boyhood of being the world's best cowbell player. Though LCD's self-titled début album did not capture this feeling, the band's second album does. **"Sound of Silver"** (DFA/Capitol) is a magnificent realization of an idea lurking inside "Losing My Edge": what if that hipster loved all the music he was name-dropping? LCD Soundsystem's starting point is a syncopated, one-note pattern, played on any number of instruments, over which Murphy performs a comic Sprechstimme that occasionally, but not often, veers into melody. The band will worry away at a rhythmic conceit and then open up into a louder version of it, with everyone shouting together. There is a marvellous, bristling energy in this music, which steals strategies from German rock, Steve Reich, and lots of obscure disco records you need know nothing about. Murphy is an unexpectedly empathic master of ceremonies, yearning to spend time with all his friends, and cautioning those who mourn their lost youth to remember "the feelings of a real live emotional teenager" and to "think again."

—Sasha Frere-Jones

BROOKLYN MUSEUM OF ART
200 Eastern Parkway (718-638-5000)—The Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art opens on March 23, with a permanent installation of Judy Chicago's **"The Dinner Party,"** and two inaugural exhibits, **"Global Feminisms"** and **"Pharaohs, Queens, and Goddesses."** ♦ **"The Eye of the Artist: The Work of Devorah Sperber."** Through May 6. ♦ **"Landscapes from the Age of Impressionism."** Through May 13. (Open Wednesdays through Fridays, 10 to 5, and weekends, 11 to 6.)

GALLERIES—UPTOWN

Galleries are usually open Tuesdays through Saturdays, from around 10 or 11 to between 5 and 6; please call the gallery for exact hours.

YOSHUA OKUN
Drug use, casual sex, and boredom in the office may not be startling topics at this cultural moment, but Okun's installation addresses each with the right mixture of slickness and discombobulation. Partitions delimit a series of empty cubicles beneath lightboxed photographs of day-job drones doing lines of cocaine, groping each other, and painting their toenails; in a second piece, a suited male mannequin on his hands and knees has an obscenely close encounter with a camcorder, which shines a static Sony logo through his eviscerated body and out the open crown of his head. Corporate hollowness gives way to a deeper void in "Bocanegra: A Walk in the Park," in which a claustrophobic ring of video monitors impassively report the progress of a parade of Nazi sympathizers in a Mexico City park. Which are hobbyists, which fetishists, which true believers? Nowadays, what's the difference? Through March 23. (The Project, 37 W. 57th St. 212-688-4673.)

Short List

JOSEPH BEUYS: Zwirner & Wirth, 32 E. 69th St. 212-517-8677. Through March 31. **ROBERT RYMAN:** PaceWildenstein, 32 E. 57th St. 212-421-3292. Through April 7. **LORD SNOWDON:** Godel & Company, 39A E. 72nd St. 212-288-7272. Through April 21. **PAUL STRAND:** Pace/MacGill, 32 E. 57th St. 212-759-7999. Through March 31. **PHILIP TAAFFE:** Gagosian, 980 Madison Ave., at 76th St. 212-744-2313. Through March 31. **"AUTOCHROMES: THE DAWN OF COLOR PHOTOGRAPHY":** Kraus, 962 Park Ave., at 82nd St. 212-794-2064. Through April 6.

GALLERIES—CHELSEA

STEPHANIE DOST / FRANZISKA HOLSTEIN
Two recent graduates of the Leipzig Academy of Visual Arts, where they studied with Neo Rauch, convey what it's like now to be inspired and immature in artistically hot eastern Germany. Dost hangs and staples, on walls, masses of little paintings, drawings, and snapshots of herself and her pals; the ensembles are handsome over all and infectious in detail. Holstein's blunt photograph-based paintings of signs and diagrams and banal domestic scenes rehearse a promising style, to no great effect. Neither artist is ready for prime time. The current market exploitation of ever younger talent verges, here, on robbing the cradle. Through March 24. (Boesky, 509 W. 24th St. 212-680-9889.)

MARIO GIACOMELLI
Giacomelli (1925-2000), the most widely exhibited Italian photographer of the modern era, is

best known for his pictures of seminarians dancing and frolicking in the snow. This smartly edited show provides a deeper, broader, and considerably darker view of his output, with an emphasis on landscapes, still-lifes, and images that slip into abstraction. Whether printed in a soft, grainy style that suggests Italian neorealist cinema or with stark high contrast, Giacomelli's black-and-white works have a graphic snap and a strong emotional undertow. Massed trees, dark clouds, rutted fields, a sky full of birds—Giacomelli's world is charged and almost alarmingly alive. Through March 31. (Silverstein, 535 W. 24th St. 212-627-3930.)

NAN GOLDIN
Goldin's early black-and-white work, made in Boston between 1972 and 1974, can't really compare with her later color photographs; it's not as intimate, as involving, or as accomplished. But her pictures of young drag queens are funny and sweet and sparked by a sense of genuine sisterhood. These were Goldin's friends and confidants, and she captures them at their most raucous and stunning (there are several knockout fashion photographs here), as well as in quieter, more melancholy moments. A slide show set to music adds later work with cross-dressers and transsexuals, including Teri Toye and Greer Lankton, and furthers the idea that gender is what you make it. Through April 14. (Marks, 523 W. 24th St. 212-243-0200.)

JUDY LINN
This survey of thirteen recent photographs—some in color, most in black-and-white—is modest, quirky, and offhandedly shrewd. Like so many contemporary photographers, Linn tends to take pictures of things that are not very interesting: bits of bread scattered on trampled snow, a sunny sidewalk peppered with tiny buds, a blond woman with an extravagant ponytail, a pine tree in a flooded field, a solitary cow. But each image is at once self-effacing and just right. The show doesn't exactly cohere (what does this woman in bed have to do with that dishtowel?), but no matter; Linn's scattershot approach feels right on target. Through March 31. (Feature, 530 W. 25th St. 212-675-7772.)

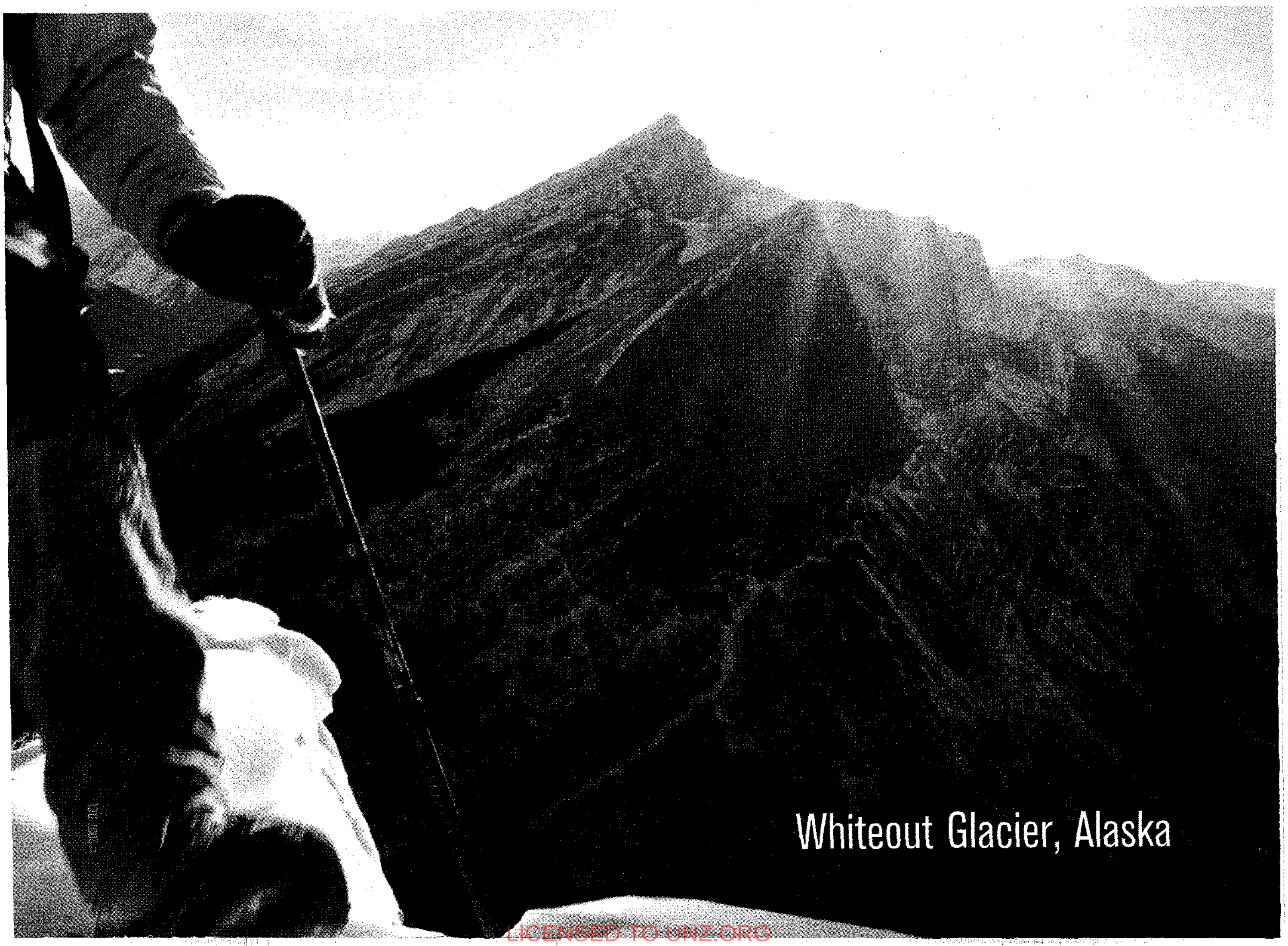
WALID RAAD
Fact and fiction have always been intertwined in Raad's work, and so it's hard to know whether to believe the arresting wall text explaining two photographic series. As a kid in Beirut, in the late seventies and early eighties, Raad supposedly collected bullets and shrapnel, and took pictures of the invading Israeli Army. In the photographs, young, sweet-looking soldiers rest in the shade; the prints bear scratches and solarized patches from the damaged negatives. In the bullets series, Raad masses colored circles over the sites—a tree trunk, a house façade—where (he says) he found the casings. This abstraction echoes in the show's third piece, a video attributed to Raad's alias, the Atlas Group, documenting a fantasy collaboration between a Lebanese journalist and a bomb investigator. The troubling uncertainty of what we call history surfaces again and again. Through March 24. (Cooper, 521 W. 21st St. 212-255-1105.)

COURTNEY SMITH
Chilly intellect meets domestic bliss in minimalist sculptures that riff on modernist furniture. For "Paraparquetry," the floor in a small gallery has been tiled with wooden blocks, in varying heights, cut (in a manner recalling the Gordon Matta-Clark show uptown) from disassembled furniture; stray drawer pulls and hinges reveal the blocks' former purposes. Visitors can take off their shoes and walk across the toe-stubbing terrain, but this might be hazardous for the nearsighted. In the main gallery, a trio of white lacquered wood pieces, each entitled "Blank Verse," falls just short of being usable as chairs and an armoire. They're cool in every sense of the word. Through March 28. (Roebling Hall, 606 W. 26th St. 212-929-8180.)

JOAN SNYDER
Thickly impastoed and embedded with glitter and twigs, Snyder's new paintings are studded with drippy blobs of pink and red, scrawled words, and even rosebuds, and center on coagulated pools rimmed like wounds with papier-mâché and pigment-stiffened burlap. The palette veers from spring green to inky blue, and Snyder's visceral handling of her media recalls old tropes about painters as Freudian sublimaters—except that, celebrating openings and tremblings as she does, she remains too much the gleefully old-school feminist to ever fill the old-boy Ab Ex bill. Through March 24. (Cuningham, 541 W. 25th St. 212-242-2772.)

Short List

HENRY CLAY ANDERSON: Kasher, 521 W. 23rd St. 212-966-3978. Through March 30. **ROSALYN DREXLER:** PaceWildenstein, 545 W. 22nd St. 212-989-4258. Through April 21. **VALIE EXPORT:** Gasser & Grunert, 524 W. 19th St. 212-807-9494. Through March 24. **RACHEL HARRISON:** Greene Naftali, 508 W. 26th St. 212-463-7770. Through March 31. **SARAH ANNE JOHNSON:** Saul, 535 W. 22nd St. 212-627-2410. Through March 24. **CHARLES LEDRAY:** Sperone Westwater, 415 W. 13th St. 212-999-7337. Through March 24. **BEATRIZ MILHAZES:** James Cohan, 533 W. 26th St. 212-714-9500. Through March 31. **TONY OURSLER:** Lehmann Maupin, 540 W. 26th St. 212-255-2923. Through March 24. **SIMON STARLING:** Kaplan, 525 W. 21st St. 212-645-7335. Through March 24.



GALLERIES—DOWNTOWN

DAVID SALLE

Why re-create an installation mounted in 1977 at the Kitchen? The logic quickly becomes obvious, since this show demonstrates how Salle started from a similar place—the appropriation arena—as artists like Richard Prince and Sherrie Levine, who have tended to earn higher art-historical and critical kudos. "Bearding the Lion in His Den" is a fairly subdued sound-photo-light installation that features Tim Buckley's mournful "Song to the Siren," while a selection of drawings, paintings, and collages from the period hint at what Salle's work later became. A reprint of the Kitchen's press release, with Eric Bogosian as the press contact, adds a bit of historical perspective. Through March 24. (Deitch, 76 Grand St. 212-343-7300.)

Short List

KRISTIN BAKER: Deitch, 18 Wooster St. 212-343-7300. Through April 21.

DANCE

"EDWARD SCISSORHANDS"

Matthew Bourne turns Tim Burton's cult film into an engaging dance-theatre spectacle. (Howard Gilman Opera House, Brooklyn Academy of Music, 30 Lafayette Ave. 718-636-4100. March 21-23 and March 27 at 7:30, March 24 at 2 and 7:30, and March 25 at 1 and 6:30. Through March 31.)

TAMANGO'S URBAN TAP

"Bay Mo Dilo" ("Give Me Water") is the most theatrically refined installment to date of the jam sessions organized by the French Guianese tap dancer known as Tamango. Joined by percussionists and dancers—and a stilt walker—from Guadeloupe, Haiti, and Côte d'Ivoire, he strikes a tricky balance between honoring tradition and incorporating technology: the sound of Tamango's bare feet is echoed electronically, and the dancers' images are multiplied through video. (Joyce Theatre, 175 Eighth Ave., at 19th St. 212-242-0800. March 20-21 at 7:30, March 22-23 at 8, March 24 at 2 and 8, and March 25 at 2 and 7:30.)

ANN LIV YOUNG

The enfant terrible of downtown dance turns a beloved fairy tale—"Snow White"—into an explicit exploration of psychosexual dominance. (The Kitchen, 512 W. 19th St. 212-255-5793. March 21-24 at 8.)

"AOI" / "KOMACHI"

The Japanese avant-garde theatre director Takeshi Kawamura infuses classic Noh plays with a dark, hallucinatory surrealism. A double bill of fifteenth-century works at the Japan Society shows his inclination toward cinematic staging (enhanced by video) and unexpected transpositions—for example, setting the action of "Aoi" in the salon of a celebrity hair stylist. The figures are arranged painstakingly, like chess pieces, within his stark sets. The acclaimed actress Rei Asami and the Butoh artist Akira Kasai perform the lead roles. (333 E. 47th St. 212-715-1258. March 22-24 at 7:30.)

CHRISTINA MOURA

The Brazilian choreographer brings her mercurial solo "Like an Idiot" to New York. She bites her arm. She spits water. She cruises and vamps on a plastic tricycle. When the recorded voice of an English interviewer asks her what her dance means, she writhes in torment. Co-presented by Danspace Project and 651 Arts. (St. Mark's In-the-Bowery, Second Ave. at 10th St. 212-674-8194. March 22-24 at 8:30.)

RAJIKA PURI AND DANCERS

Rajika Puri has toured around the world as a soloist in traditional Indian dance forms. More recently, in New York, she has been creating nontraditional works, of which "Conversations with Shiva: Bharatanatyam Unwrapped" is the latest. Joining forces with eight New York-based dancers, Puri shifts the emphasis of the bharata-natyam form away from individual virtuosity, in an evening of ensemble dancing. Two musicians and a sound engineer embroider traditional melodies with additional layers and soundscapes. (Joyce SoHo, 155 Mercer St. 212-334-7479. March 22-25 at 8.)

ADRIENNE TRUSCOTT

"Genesis, No!" takes place in a kind of natural-history museum of the mind, where figures from different eras and civilizations coexist. (The title comes from a conversation overheard at a museum.) Onstage, we see loincloths and rocks and maize, but also piles of tires and T-shirts. Anything could happen here, with performers emerging when and where one least expects them to. (P.S. 122, at 150 First Ave., at 9th St. 212-352-3101. March 22-23 at 8, March 24 at 5 and 8, and March 25 at 5.)

NEW CHAMBER BALLET

The young choreographer Miro Magloire returns to City Center Studio 4 for one of his intimate ballet presentations. Magloire keeps it simple, putting the focus on the music, played live by his company pianist and violinist. This time, he offers an Italian evening, using music from the Baroque (Corelli and Tartini) and the avant-garde (Luigi Dallapiccola, Luciano Berio). "Follia" ("Madness"), a new trio

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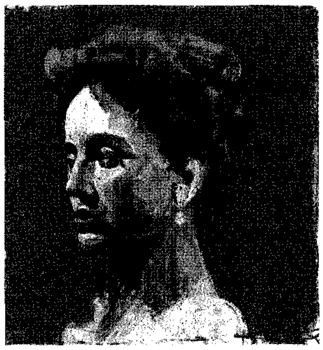
CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK
PRACTICE TO DECEIVE

Is there any reason to miss Max Ophüls's "The Earrings of Madame de . . . ," from 1953, showing at Film Forum through March 29? The only suitable excuse, aside from death, would be to have mislaid a pair of



earrings: that, after all, is the loss—invented by the heroine (Danielle Darrieux), an expert in white lies—that sets the film in motion. She was given the jewels by her husband (Charles Boyer), yet by chance, always a major player in Ophüls, they end up in the hands of her lover, an Italian diplomat (Vittorio De Sica), and thus back in hers. What starts as a game—the permissible flirtations of the wealthy—darkens into tragedy, in just the same way that the smile slowly drains from Boyer's face. Such silvery transformations were the hallmark of Ophüls, who did more with a single waltz, as an emblem of the pursuit of love, than most directors manage in an entire career. If you ever wondered who in cinema inherited the complexities of the nineteenth-century novel and wore them as lightly as diamonds, here is your answer.

—Anthony Lane

to Corelli, and three other works will be performed by Magloire's sextet of excellent, classically trained dancers. (130 W. 56th St. 212-868-4444. March 23-24 at 8:30.)

DANCES PATRELLE
The theatrical ballet ensemble presents two new works, one by the company's artistic director, Francis Patrelle, and the other by a guest choreographer, Leda Meredith, as well as two older pieces by Patrelle. Guest performers include the lovely Jenifer Ringer, of New York City Ballet, and Jonathan Porretta, of Pacific Northwest Ballet. (Ailey Citigroup Theatre, 405 W. 55th St. 212-415-5500. March 23 at 8, March 24 at 2 and 8, and March 25 at 2 and 6:30.)

"WORKS & PROCESS"
The austere compositions of the Italian choreographer Luca Veggetti are the subject of this week's installment of the performance-and-discussion series. Here, dancers from the Cincinnati Ballet will interpret a new trilogy commissioned from Veggetti, set to pieces—one for flute, one for accordion, and one for piano—by the Japanese contemporary composer Toshio Hokosawa. The dances will then be parsed by the choreographer, the company's artistic director, and the Guggenheim's senior curator of Asian art. (Guggenheim Museum, Fifth Ave. at 89th St. 212-523-3587. March 25-26 at 7:30.)

SOL PICÓ
As part of the "Made in CataluNYa" festival—organized by the Institut Ramon Llull and presented by the Baryshnikov Arts Center—New York audiences will have a chance to see free performances by three of the region's dance companies. The first, "Kiss Me the Cactus," is a one-woman show by the charismatic Sol Picó. Picó combines self-mocking ballet and modern dance with a vaudevillian sensibility in this very personal exploration of her relationship to performance. (450 W. 37th St. 212-279-4200. March 26 at 8:30.)

CLASSICAL MUSIC
OPERA

METROPOLITAN OPERA
Bartlett Sher's lively new production of **"Il Barbiere di Siviglia"** features a gilt-edged cast that includes Joyce DiDonato, Juan Diego Flórez, Peter Mattei, and John Relyea; Maurizio Benini, a reliable interpreter of the French and Italian repertories, conducts. (March 21 at 7:30 and March 24 at 1:30.) ♦ Now that Plácido Domingo has, appropriately, retired the leading role, **"Andrea Chénier"** can be passed on to Ben Heppner, whose voice combines house-filling power with lyrical Italianate grace. Violeta Urmana, a rapidly rising presence at the house, sings the role of Maddalena; Marco Armiliato. (March 22 at 7:30 and March 26 at 8.) ♦ The dramatic soprano Deborah Voigt is Helen of Troy in **"Die Ägyptische Helena,"** a lavish Strauss-Hofmannsthal rarity from the nineteen-twenties. The new production, by David Fielding, also features such fine singers as Diana Damrau, Jill Grove, and Torsten Kerl; Fabio Luisi. (March 23 and March 27 at 8.) ♦ The Franco Zeffirelli production of **"La Traviata"** returns with a cast headed by last season's two stars, the willful Romanian diva Angela Gheorghiu (in her only performance of the role this season) and the ardent young German tenor Jonas Kauffman, a convincing pair. The always impressive Dwayne Croft is Germont; Armiliato. (March 24 at 8.) (Metropolitan Opera House. 212-362-6000.)

NEW YORK CITY OPERA
A new production of Gilbert and Sullivan's **"Pirates of Penzance"** features not only the Broadway stars Marc Kudisch (as the Pirate King) and Mark Jacoby but such skillful house comedians as Myrna Paris and Kevin Burdette, and Sarah Jane McMahon and Matt Morgan as the romantic leads; Gerald Steichen conducts. (March 21 at 7:30 and March 24 at 8.) ♦ One of the accomplishments of Paul Kellogg's years as general manager has been to restore City Opera's reputation as a bel-canto house. The next such presentation is of **"La Donna del Lago,"** an ingratiating Rossini opera not heard in the city since 1833, which is being revived by the director Chas Rader-Shieber. The cast is headed by two solid performers, Alexandrina Pendatchanska and Barry Banks, who are joined by Laura Vlasak Nolen, Robert McPherson, and Daniel Mobbs; George Manahan. (March 22 at 7:30 and March 24 at 1:30.) ♦ **"Madama Butterfly,"** with Angela Maria Blasi, Misoon Ghim, Raul Melo, and Grant Youngblood in the leading roles; Manahan. (March 23 at 8, March 25 at 1:30, and March 27 at 7:30.) (New York State Theatre. 212-721-6500.)

ORCHESTRAS AND CHORUSES

NEW YORK PHILHARMONIC
The hearty yet tasteful style of the conductor Colin Davis is always appreciated at Avery Fisher Hall. He returns to conjure up the Olympian grace of Haydn's Symphony No. 85, "La Reine," along with Mozart's Piano Concerto No. 19 in F Major (with Mitsuko Uchida) and Schubert's Symphony No. 4, "Tragic." (March 22 at 7:30 and March 23-24 at 8.) (212-875-5656.)

ORPHEUS CHAMBER ORCHESTRA
The Temple of Dendur will provide a grand, pre-Christian backdrop for the conductorless chamber orchestra's next performance in its Bach-cantata series at the Metropolitan Museum; the tenor Benjamin Sosland, the baritone Richard Lalli, and the bass-baritone Arthur Burrows join the group in the Cantatas Nos. 42 and 134 ("Ein Herz, das seinen Jesum lebend weiss"). (Fifth Ave. at 82nd St. 212-570-3949. March 23 at 6:30 and 8:30.)

THE BACH PASSIONS
Two groups offer performances of Bach's Easter masterworks. March 23 at 7:30: The St. Thomas Choir of Men and Boys, the country's leading Anglican chorus, sings the St. Matthew Passion with a slate of soloists that includes Andreas Karsiak and Stephen Salters, under the direction of Martin Haselböck. (Fifth Ave. at 53rd St. To purchase tickets, visit www.saintthomaschurch.org.) ♦ March 25 at 3: Charles Brink's Grand Tour Orchestra, spreading its wings in its first season, offers the St. John Passion in an intimate performance featuring the soprano Hélène Guilmette and the baritone Randall Scarlata, among other vocalists. (St. Ann and the Holy Trinity Church, 157 Montague St., Brooklyn Heights. 718-855-3053.)

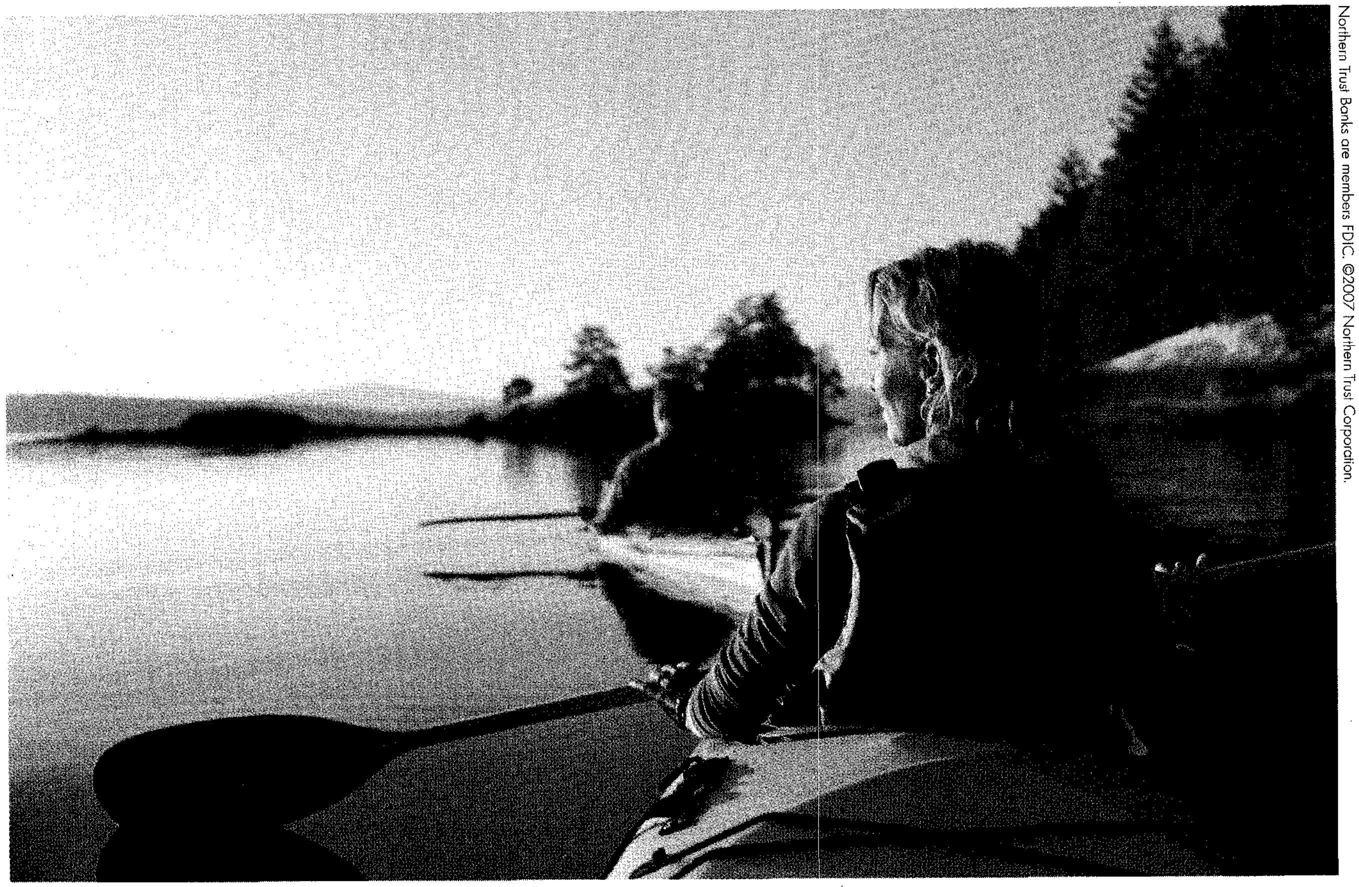
AMERICAN COMPOSERS ORCHESTRA
The venerable band makes some prominent composer-performers (including Vijay Iyer on piano, Steven Mackey on guitar, and Harold Meltzer on harpsichord) sing for their supper by soloing in their own works. Dennis Russell Davies, the conductor, will also lead a work by Tania León. (Zankel Hall. 212-247-7800. March 26 at 7:30.)

NDR SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA
Christoph von Dohnányi leads this respected German radio orchestra in two concerts at Carnegie Hall, with the commanding violinist Vadim Repin as its guest. March 26 at 8: Mendelssohn's "Ruy Blas" Overture, Schnittke's Violin Concerto No. 4, and Brahms's Symphony No. 1 in C Minor. ♦ March 27 at 8: Ligeti's "Lontano," Mendelssohn's Violin Concerto, and Mahler's First Symphony. (212-247-7800.)

RECITALS

DIANA DAMRAU
The radiant German coloratura soprano, much in demand at the Met, has her New York recital début at Carnegie's Weill Recital Hall, which will feature, along with favorite songs by Liszt, Rachmaninoff, Strauss, and Berg, a rare performance of Samuel Barber's ultra-refined Rilke cycle, "Mélodies Passagères." (212-247-7800. March 21 at 7:30.)

ANDREA VENTURA



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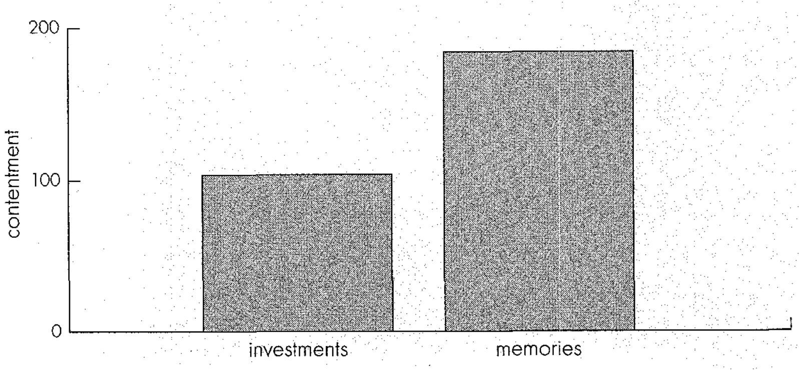

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ZANKEL HALL RECITALS
March 21 at 7:30: Ingrid Fliter, the winner of the 2006 Gilmore Artist Award, makes her New York recital début with a concert of solo piano works by Beethoven, Schubert (the Sonata in A Major, D. 959), and Chopin (including the Scherzo No. 4 and the Barcarolle in F-Sharp Major). ♦ March 23 at 7:30: The program offered by the baritone Gerald Finley, a singer of uncommon power and appeal, begins with "Dichterliebe" and continues with such vivid American works as Ives's "The Housatonic at Stockbridge," Rorem's "War Scenes," and Barber's Three Songs to Poems by James Joyce. (212-721-6500.)

CHAMBER MUSIC SOCIETY OF LINCOLN CENTER: "MARCH WINDS"
Concerts of wind-ensemble music are rarely as distinguished as this one, a program featuring works by Mozart (the Quintet for Piano and Winds), Spohr, Stravinsky, Carter ("Esprit Rude/Esprit Doux II"), and Hindemith, performed by such musicians as the oboist Stephen Taylor and the pianist Anne-Marie McDermott. (Alice Tully Hall. 212-875-5788. March 23 at 8 and March 25 at 5.)

SO PERCUSSION: MUSIC BY STEVE REICH
Reich's "Music for Eighteen Musicians," along with Philip Glass's "Einstein on the Beach," put New York minimalism on the map in 1976. The impressive percussion ensemble performs it (with "Music for Pieces of Wood") with such able musicians as the pianist Lisa Moore sitting in. (Miller Theatre, Columbia University, Broadway at 116th St. 212-854-7799. March 23-24 at 8.)

LOUIS LORTIE
This French-Canadian pianist has it all: an assured technique, an inquiring mind, and a style of breathtaking elegance and poise. His Carnegie Hall recital features not only great works by Liszt ("Vallée d'Obermann") and Chopin (the Sonata in B Minor) but also two haunting miniatures by Thomas Adès, "Darknesse Visible" and "Traced Overhead." (212-247-7800. March 24 at 8.)

MURRAY PERAHIA
A living legend of the piano, seldom heard in New York, comes to Avery Fisher Hall. His program, featuring Beethoven's Piano Sonatas Nos. 9 and 10, Schumann's "Fantasiestücke," Op. 12, Chopin's Ballade No. 4, and Bach's Partita No. 3 in A Minor, is lovingly and carefully selected. (212-721-6500. March 25 at 3.)

WOLFGANG HOLZMAIR'S "WOLFIADE"
The Austrian Cultural Forum presents a series of concerts by the richly expressive baritone Wolfgang Holzmair, performing the songs of Hugo Wolf. It begins with a selection of the "Goethe Lieder," in which he collaborates with the mezzo-soprano Hermine Hasselböck. (Weill Recital Hall, Carnegie Hall. For free tickets, which are required, call 212-319-5300, ext. 222. March 27 at 8.)

CONCERTANTE
A new work by the admired Armenian composer Tigran Mansurian (no stranger to fans of the ECM label) is the highlight of the vibrant string sextet's latest program at Merkin Concert Hall, which begins with Martinů's String Sextet and ends with Brahms's Clarinet Quintet (with Alexander Fiterstein). (129 W. 67th St. 212-501-3330. March 27 at 8.)

MOVIES OPENING

AIR GUITAR NATION
A documentary, directed by Alexandra Lipsitz, about the U.S. Air Guitar Championships. Opening March 23. (Angelika Film Center.)

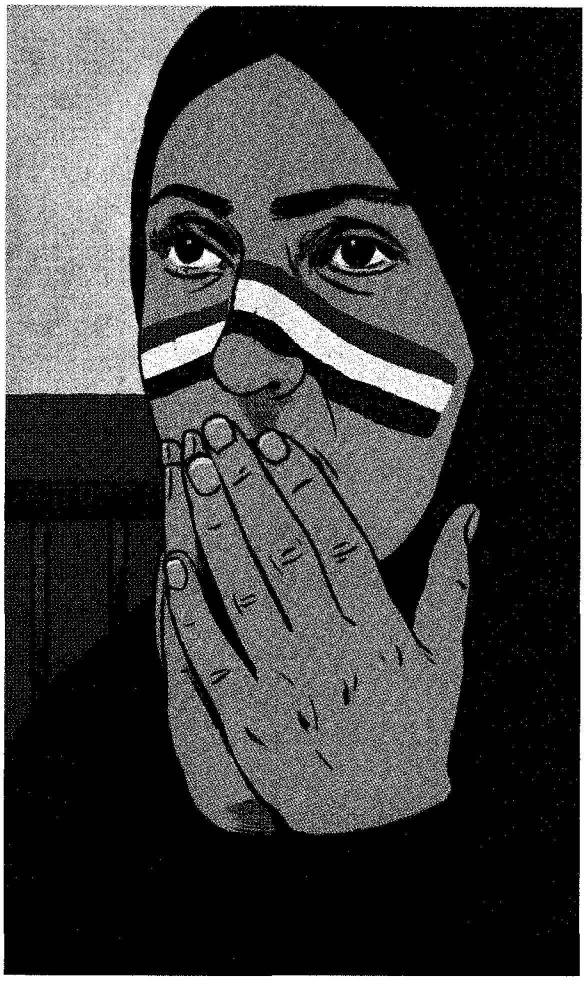
COLOR ME KUBRICK
Brian Cook directed this comedy, about a con man who claims to be Stanley Kubrick. Starring John Malkovich. Opening March 23. (IFC Center.)

FIRST SNOW
A drama, directed by Mark Fergus, about a man whose life is altered by a psychic's predictions. Starring Guy Pearce and Piper Perabo. Opening March 23. (Sunshine Cinema.)

THE HILLS HAVE EYES 2
Martin Weisz directed this horror sequel, in which the National Guard battles mutants. Opening March 23. (In wide release.)

THE LAST MIMZY
Robert Shaye directed this children's drama, about a brother and sister (Rhiannon Leigh Wryn and Chris O'Neil) who discover a magic box of toys. Opening March 23. (In wide release.)

MEMORY
A doctor takes a hallucinogen in order to try to solve a murder. Directed by Bennett Davlin; starring Billy Zane, Ann-Margret, and Dennis Hopper. Opening March 23. (Sunshine Cinema.)



"Offside," a comic drama from Iran, opens March 23.

RUTH GWILY

OFFSIDE
Reviewed below in Now Playing. Opening March 23. (Lincoln Plaza Cinemas and Quad Cinema.)

THE PAGE TURNER
A drama, directed by Denis Dercourt, about a former pianist (Deborah François) who becomes the page turner for the musician who ruined her career. In French. Opening March 23. (Angelika Film Center and Lincoln Plaza Cinemas.)

THE PRISONER, OR: HOW I PLANNED TO KILL TONY BLAIR
A documentary, by Petra Epperlein and Michael Tucker, about an Iraqi journalist who was mistaken for a terrorist by American forces and imprisoned at Abu Ghraib. Opening March 23. (Cinema Village.)

REIGN OVER ME
Reviewed this week in The Current Cinema. Opening March 23. (In wide release.)

SHOOTER
Antoine Fuqua directed this action drama, about a sharpshooter (Mark Wahlberg) who is recruited to prevent the assassination of the President. Co-starring Danny Glover, Ned Beatty, and Kate Mara. Opening March 23. (In wide release.)

TEENAGE MUTANT NINJA TURTLES
Kevin Munroe directed this animated action film; with the voices of Sarah Michelle Gellar, Mako, Patrick Stewart, Laurence Fishburne, and Kevin Smith. Opening March 23. (In wide release.)

NOW PLAYING

AMAZING GRACE
Square but stirring. William Wilberforce (Ioan Gruffudd), upon entering Parliament, in 1780, at the age of twenty-one, resolved, with the aid of his friend William Pitt (Benedict Cumberbatch), soon to be Prime Minister, at the age of twenty-four, to end the slave trade in the British Empire. Michael Apted's historical epic, from a screenplay by Steven Knight, starts in 1797, when Wilberforce, suffering from colitis and getting much rained on (every time he goes out, he's doused), is at a low ebb. He is saved by the attentions of Barbara Spooner (Romola Garai), a Gainsborough beauty with a luxurious pile of red hair and an exposed pale bosom. As the picture goes backward in time and then forward again, there are eloquent debates, much moral and physical anguish from Wilberforce, and a spirit of Christian resolve, attended, fortunately, by wit. Gruffudd has a serious brow, a wide smile, and romantically disordered locks, and, in the parliamentary scenes, he plants his feet and lets his voice ring out. With Albert Finney as the anguished ex-slave-ship captain John Newton, who wrote the words to the hymn "Amazing Grace," Michael Gambon as the influential Whig politician Charles James Fox, the singer Youssou N'Dour as the ex-slave Ouladaqh Equiano, and, as the radical agitator Thomas Clarkson, the supercilious Rufus Sewell, who might have trouble stifling a smirk while reciting the Seven Last Words of Christ.—*David Denby* (Reviewed in our issue of 3/5/07.) (In wide release.)

BREACH
A sombre real-life thriller about an incomprehensible man—Robert Hanssen (a leathery Chris Cooper), who spied for the Soviet Union and Russia for more than two decades while productively employed as a counter-intelligence agent for the F.B.I. Hanssen loved this country, didn't spy for money, went to church all the time, and also made films, for a male friend, of himself and his wife making love. The movie is devoted to the young and ambitious F.B.I. employee Eric O'Neill (Ryan Phillippe), who helped trap Hanssen. (He was arrested in February, 2001.) Most thrillers are hyped up; this one is grayed out. Tak Fujimoto shot it in subdued light, mostly in dour institutional corridors. The unexciting look and feel of the movie would be acceptable if the filmmakers had penetrated Hanssen's skull a little, but they didn't. Written by Adam Mazer, William Rotko, and Billy Ray, and directed by Ray. The picture was made in consultation with O'Neill.—*D.D.* (2/19 & 26/07) (In wide release.)

BRIDGE TO TERABITHIA
Katherine Paterson's children's classic gets an imaginative, emotional telling in the director Gabor Csupo's film about a bullied seventh grader (Josh Hutcherson) whose friendship with a young girl (AnnaSophia Robb) leads them to create a made-up, escapist world. The screenwriters, Jeff Stockwell and David Paterson (the author's son), have crafted a wonderful and affecting story, deftly balancing the real-world

problems of introverted children and the fantasy lives they create to help them deal with their solitude. The special effects suggest a Narnia-like romp, but the movie has a darker, more sorrowful landscape to explore and it does so brilliantly, with true nuance and heartfelt sincerity.—*Bruce Diones* (In wide release.)

THE HOST

Something is hiding in the River Han, in the middle of Seoul. As a result of industrial pollution, a small tadpole has grown not into a respectable frog but into a bad-tempered tadpole the size of a bus. Soon it starts leaving the water, snatching ordinary Koreans from the banks and carrying them off to its fetid home in the sewers. When a young girl is taken, her father, the hitherto hopeless Gang-du (Song Kang-ho), enlists the aid of his family and sets off to save her. Bong Joon-ho's monster movie is often funny and occasionally disgusting, but rarely does it strike you as ridiculous. By the end (which is only just happy), you feel threatened and drained, as you should after a grownup fairy tale, and there are moments of surprising grace—watch an apparition of the girl sneak into the midst of a communal meal. On the other hand, don't go looking for mercy from the beast; this thing would treat King Kong as a typical bleeding-heart mammal. In Korean.—*Anthony Lane* (3/12/07) (Empire 25 and Sunshine Cinema.)

I THINK I LOVE MY WIFE

A missed opportunity. For his second directorial effort, Chris Rock (working with a co-writer, Louis C.K.) closely adapts Eric Rohmer's 1972 "Chloe in the Afternoon," about a happily married businessman with a wandering eye whose fantasy life is put to the test by an intense platonic relationship with a temptress who reappears from his past. Rock, who also stars, can't decide whether to aim for realism or for comedy, and the result is neither credible nor funny. Filming on location in New York, Rock places his character, Richard Cooper, in an investment bank in a midtown tower where they ought to review their security arrangements: sleek, sexy Nikki Tru (Kerry Washington) keeps turning up in his office uninvited and unannounced. As a director, Rock doesn't reimagine Rohmer's story but merely borrows it; as an actor, he keeps slipping back into an overeager yelping that takes a viewer back to his small-screen persona. The other actors, including Gina Torres as his wife, Steve Buscemi as his colleague, and Edward Herrmann as his boss, fulfill their stereotypical roles one-dimensionally. The best thing in the film is the comic riffing on a serious subject, the social identity of America's black middle class, but it is too diluted by sketch comedy to take hold.—*Richard Brody* (In wide release.)

THE LIVES OF OTHERS

This first feature from the young German director Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck starts in 1984, in East Berlin. A successful playwright (Sebastian Koch) and his girlfriend (Martina Gedeck), hitherto trusted by the state, are placed under Stasi surveillance. Their investigator, a lonely ascetic by the name of Wiesler (Ulrich Mühe), is told to entrap them, instead of which, little by little, he lets them off the hook. Given the movie's cross-weave of envy, terror, paranoia, and endangered principle, Donnersmarck might have been expected to tie himself in knots; yet the outcome, after two and a half hours, remains taut and clear, and by the end you feel exhausted and oddly uplifted. What was the last new movie that put you through so much yet convinced you that the ordeal was worthwhile? With Ulrich Tukur as Wiesler's cheerfully vicious boss. In German.—*A.L.* (2/12/07) (Angelika Film Center and Lincoln Plaza Cinemas.)

MODEL

Frederick Wiseman's incisive 1980 documentary about the modelling business starts in the middle, at the Zoli agency, on East Sixty-second Street, which plays gatekeeper to aspiring models and matchmaker for the clients who employ them. Wiseman, the most analytical of filmmakers, is fascinated by the thought processes behind the making of images: in scenes of advertising photographers at work, his extreme closeups of models reveal the finely calibrated control over gesture and expression, which yields moments of ineffable mystery. The film's longest sequence, about the exacting, expensive labor needed for an ordinary television commercial, shows the remarkable gap between the reality that its directors work with and the one in their mind which they manage to depict. Yet Wiseman comes down in favor of the former: his film is above all a paean to New York, which is a splendid visual presence throughout. Its critical mass of talent and money, the spontaneous styles of its vigorous street life, and the real-life backdrops that set the world dreaming are seen to converge in even the most trivial advertisements.—*R.B.* (Moving Image; March 24.)

MOLIÈRE

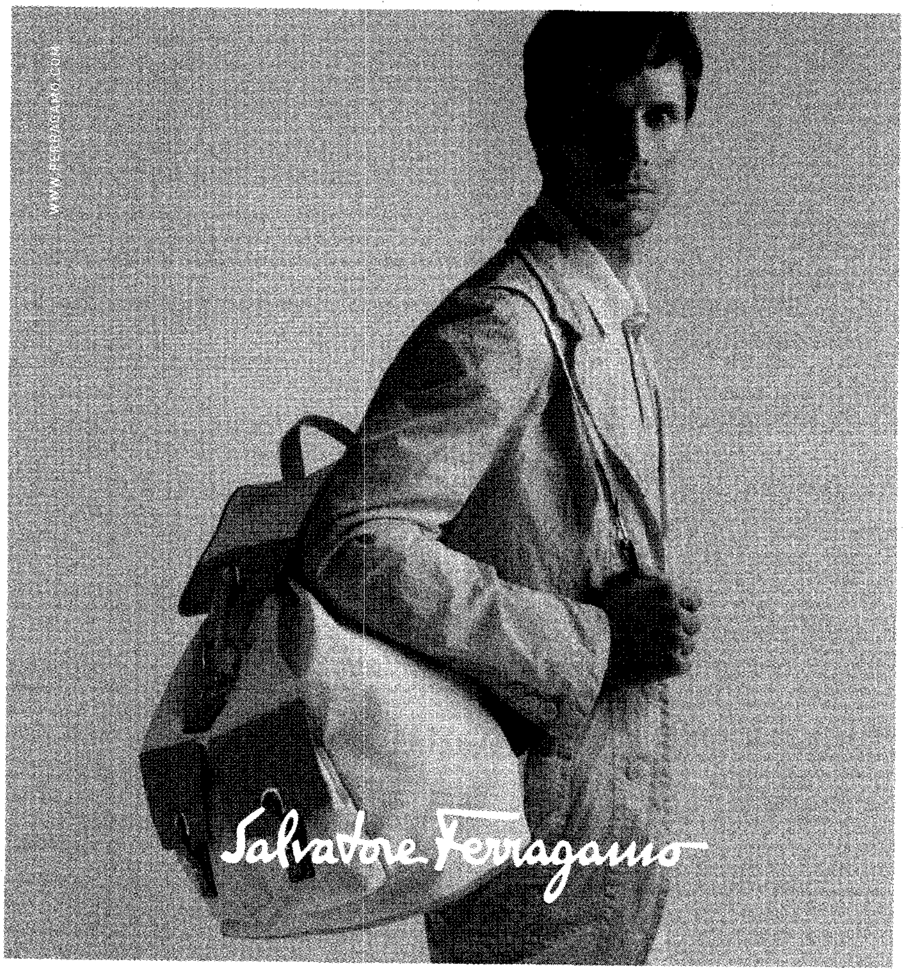
This audacious, epic bio-pic captures its playwright hero mostly by re-creating the public and artistic events of his life. The French stage director Ariane Mnouchkine depicts Molière (1622-73) as a bourgeois child fascinated with Twelfth Night carollers and Italian street farceurs, as a renegade law student in thrall to the pagan pleasures of the outlawed Mardi Gras, and as an apprentice learning stagecraft from a troupe that crisscrosses impoverished provincial France. Mnouchkine's dramatic method is to take biographical soil samples of the different layers of her subject's life. We glimpse him learning how to play an old man, and then becoming an old man, and then playing an old man again with the greater authenticity gained through experience. Because Mnouchkine loves parades and pageantry, she's able to reflect the manufactured lustre of Molière's monarch, Louis XIV, in all its artificial glory. Molière's death scene, in which his friends and colleagues flash before him as he struggles up a staircase, suggests why Mnouchkine's external approach works so well: in many ways, Molière's life *was* a parade. Released in 1978. In French.—*Michael Sragow* (French Institute Alliance Française; March 23.)

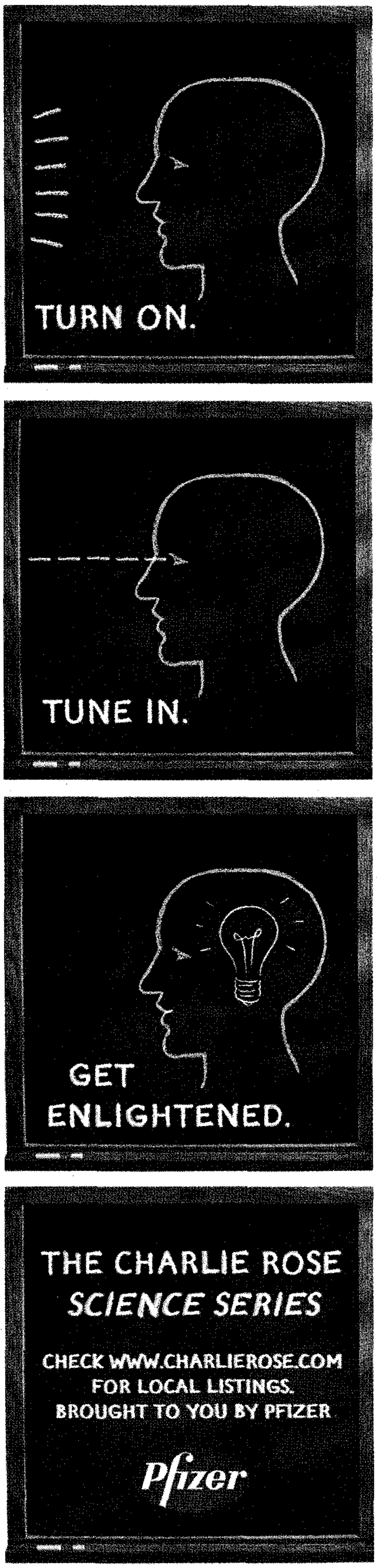
THE NAMESAKE

A word is worth a thousand pictures. Jhumpa Lahiri's prose carries the weight of experience, color, and texture, but Mira Nair's adaptation of Lahiri's 2000 novel (Sooni Taraporevala wrote the screenplay), while perfectly pleasant, is a little bland. After Ashima (Tabu), a beautiful young woman from Calcutta, marries the gentle university researcher Ashoke Ganguli (Irfan Khan) and relocates to New Jersey, she stands silently in her suburban kitchen; the magic of Lahiri's depiction of the strangeness of a new culture is mostly gone. The filmmakers also have an insoluble problem on their hands: the story jumps ahead abruptly in time, so each scene is meant to epitomize a phase of the couple's life in America, but since Ashima and Ashoke are both reserved, each word of dialogue is burdened with more significance than it can possibly bear. Things lighten up a lot in the next generation, when the couple's son, Gogol (Kal Penn), eagerly assimilates to American ways. Zuleikha Robinson is very lively as a young Bengali woman who has spent some time in Paris and carries on like a character in a scandalous French novel.—*D.D.* (Angelika Film Center and Paris.)

NORBIT

Eddie Murphy mocks every stereotype in the book and invents a few of his own in this raucous, vulgar comic extravaganza. In the three lead roles—the mild-mannered title character; Rasputia, the blustering, obese harridan he marries; and Mr. Wong, the owner of the Chinese restaurant-cum-orphanage where he was raised—Murphy cuts loose with a panoply of antic impressions unmatched since the heyday of Jerry Lewis. As Norbit, Murphy channels the meek persona at the center of many Lewis classics, down to the accent, but he focusses the film on Rasputia, a scintillating, uproarious villain. De-

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spite the innumerable gags about her physique, this is, above all, a comedy of spousal abuse. Though the director, Brian Robbins, doesn't do much more than stage-manage the riotous proceedings, Murphy is clearly having a great time, and it's infectious.—*R.B.* (In wide release.)

OFFSIDE

The Iranian director Jafar Panahi offers only pallid criticism of his country's laws in this comic drama about six young Iranian women who disguise themselves as boys in an attempt to sneak into a soccer game, which women are forbidden to attend. The daring is in the method: Panahi filmed the dramatic action in and around Azadi Stadium, in Tehran, on the day of the World Cup qualifying match between Iran and Bahrain, the results of which factor into the story. Panahi's subject is not only the absurd law (which has comic consequences as well—the stadium has no women's bathrooms) but the narrow-minded attitudes on which it is based, as expressed by young soldiers who do their duty to stop the women. Nonetheless, Panahi's blandly sentimental view of soccer, nationalism, soldiers, families, and the religious police, while banned in Iran, is no audacious samizdat but, rather, sweetened exoticism for export. In Farsi.—*R.B.* (Lincoln Plaza Cinemas and Quad Cinema.)

PREMONITION

Reviewed this week in The Current Cinema. (In wide release.)

RENO 911!: MIAMI

Frickin' hilarious. Familiarity with the Comedy Central show that spawned this glorious waste of celluloid is not essential. Created and shot as a handheld spoof of "Cops," the movie gathers up the sometimes swaggering, sometimes trembling, always inept members of the Reno Sheriff's Department and deposits them at a police convention in Miami for a ridiculous adventure flavored with a lot of drinking and intramural sex. The eight-person comedy troupe brings a brilliant improvisatory style to the big screen. They're comfortable enough to be utterly shameless: clothing, taboos, and propriety fly away in the Florida breeze. Laughs this big don't come along often. Written by the troupe members Ben Garant, Thomas Lennon, and Kerri Kenney, and directed by Garant.—*Ken Marks* (In wide release.)

300

Computer-generated images run amok in this rendering, directed by Zack Snyder, of Frank Miller's graphic novel about the Battle of Thermopylae, where three hundred Spartans and other Greek soldiers attempted to hold off the invasion of the mighty Persian Army, in 480 B.C. The highly stylized movie, with its battleship-gray skies and copper fields, is more painted than filmed (it's state-of-the-art color manipulation), but the story has little dramatic weight. The dialogue, delivered with different degrees of difficulty by some rather Conanesque actors (including Gerard Butler and Rodrigo Santoro), is no worse than in most swords-and-sandals films, but the movie offers little characterization and not much to root for except the brilliantly choreographed carnage.—*B.D.* (In wide release.)

THE WIND THAT SHAKES THE BARLEY

The 1920-22 Irish revolt against the English, reimagined by the social realist Ken Loach as an awkwardly violent and sombre old poem made without the usual Irish flourishes of wildness or lyricism. The British military cars, tin lizzies carrying men in the open, are almost comically antique and vulnerable; the I.R.A. rebels, who wear awkward long coats and caps as they scramble across a hill, look less like a guerrilla force than like fellows who had planned to go shopping with their families but somehow got sidetracked into a bizarre adventure. Loach is trying for his own kind of scrappy truthfulness, in which pent-up physical violence bursts forth clumsily, without the usual stylized glamour of classic movie mayhem. Here, violence has the look of surprise. With Cillian Murphy as a refined young rebel who wants complete separation from Great Britain and a socialist revolution in Ireland, and Padraic Delaney as his rough-hewn brother, who is willing to accept the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921. Shot in County Cork by the cinematographer Barry Ackroyd.—*D.D.* (3/19/07) (In wide release.)

TABLES FOR TWO
AMORINA

624 Vanderbilt Ave., at Prospect Pl., Brooklyn (718-230-3030)—Amorina is a study in contradictions. The bright lights, set in mismatched fixtures, the neon sign in the window, and the takeout service seem to indicate a neighborhood pizza joint, but the relatively high prices—twelve dollars for most of the individual pies—seem more in line with the artisanal aspirations of Franny's, another lofty-minded pizza place, two blocks over, on Flatbush Avenue. (On the other hand, Amorina also offers a takeout special, listed on a blackboard behind the counter: two slices and a drink for five dollars.) The Italian memorabilia on the walls—vintage ice-cream and soda ads, a map of Umbria and Le Marche, receipts from the café that the grandmother of the owner, Albano Ballerini, operated in Italy—speak of tradition, but the menu includes such unconventional offerings as the Giallorossa, with dried cherries, nutmeg, and crème fraîche.

Ruth Kaplan, the *pizzaiola*, produces almost perfectly charred and crispy crusts, and creates their toppings with an eye to detail: thinly sliced, almost transparent zucchini laid out like an emerald mosaic and laced with pesto; atop the *tricolore* pizza, a heap of arugula with a dusting of salt. A Gorgonzola pie with pears and figs was creamy and only slightly sweet, despite a drizzle of dark honey, while a Siciliana pie successfully married the acidic tang of orange slices to lightly caramelized onions and fennel. There are pastas, too, including a meaty, not too saucy lasagna, but they can feel halfhearted, as a tepid spaghetti with calamari and peas did on a recent visit.

Even so, the homey atmosphere—flowery wallpaper, turquoise tiles—makes the little things that are slightly off, like warm wineglasses, seem somehow charming. "We have to store our glassware near the superhot oven," the waitress explained, gesturing toward the small kitchen. After the last slice of pizza has been devoured (it's better to be a glutton than to take it home; the crust is better when fresh), there's a dessert tray to inspect. The tiramisu could be the restaurant's mascot: it's humble (served in a tumbler), evocative (the ur-dessert of Italian eateries everywhere), and deliciously idiosyncratic (less ladyfinger, more superbly thick mascarpone). (Open Tuesdays through Sundays for dinner. Entrées $9.50-$13.50.)

—*Andrea Thompson*

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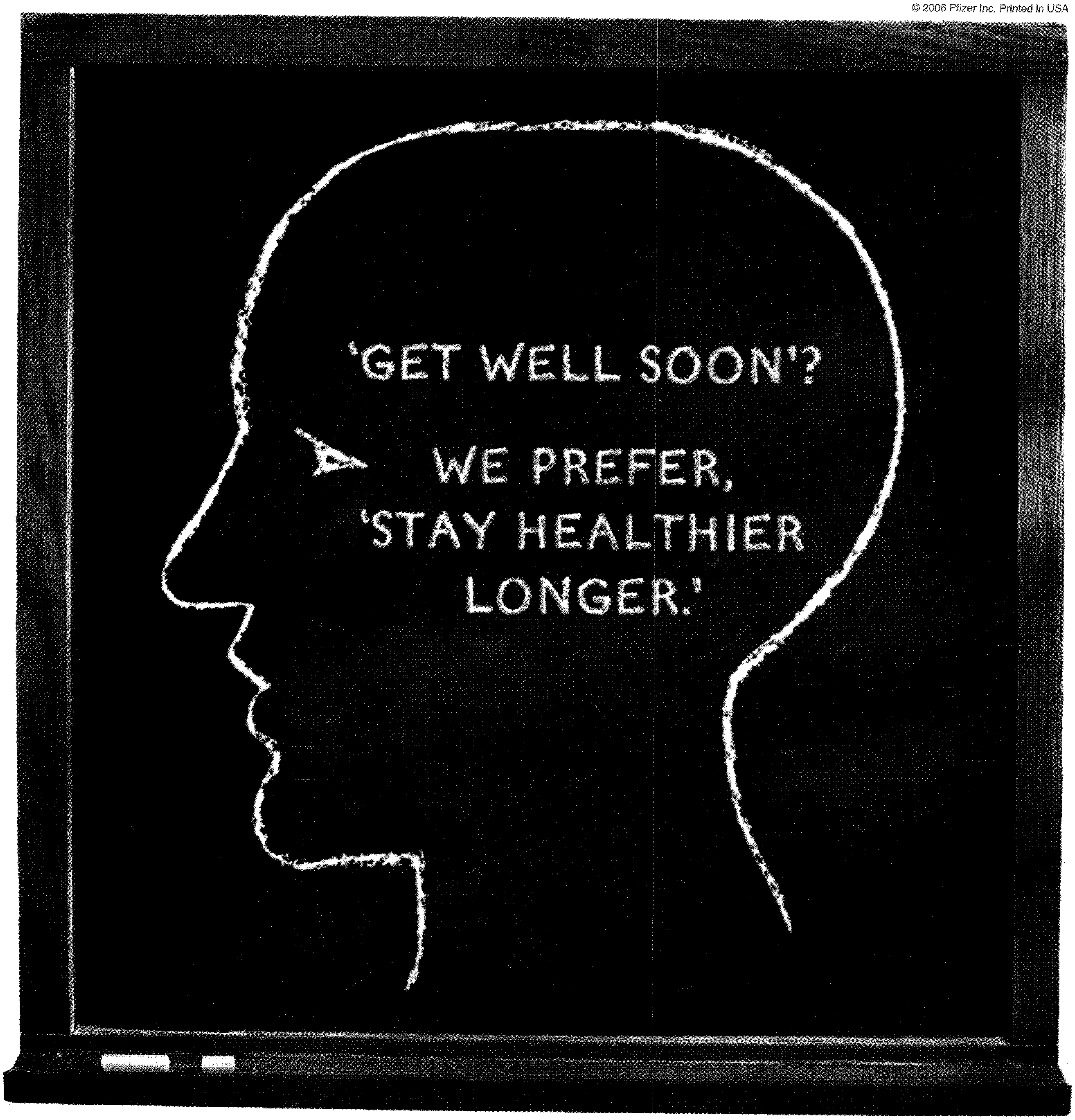

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ZODIAC
The great film critic Manny Farber once praised "termite art," the kind of small, stubborn movie that chews its way through a narrow piece of turf. David Fincher's "Zodiac" is mollusk art: the movie keeps elaborating itself out of its own discharge, hardening its emotions, anxieties, and energies into a shell of obsession. Fincher, working with a fantastically detailed script by the young James Vanderbilt, chronicles the case of the self-identified Zodiac killer, a taunting, publicity-mad creep who murdered at least five people in the San Francisco Bay Area in the late sixties and sent confessional notes about the crimes (sometimes in cipher) to newspapers. At the San Francisco *Chronicle*, a young cartoonist, Robert Graysmith (Jake Gyllenhaal), becomes obsessed with the case and stays obsessed, outlasting the police, other reporters, and the killer himself. Moving swiftly but with precise attention to the emotional coloring of such things as weather and light and dour institutional spaces, Fincher runs through interrogations, trips to the library, and the sorting and matching of mounds of evidence. It's a superbly made but (by its very nature) inconclusive film, in which the obsession itself, rather than any payoff, is the point. With Robert Downey, Jr., as an alcoholic ace reporter, Anthony Edwards and Mark Ruffalo as two hardworking cops, and Chloë Sevigny as Graysmith's exasperated wife. Based on Graysmith's books about the case.—*D.D.* (3/19/07) (In wide release.)

Also Playing

THE ASTRONAUT FARMER: In wide release. **DADDY'S LITTLE GIRLS:** In wide release. **DEAD SILENCE:** In wide release. **GHOST RIDER:** In wide release. **THE NUMBER 23:** In wide release. **WILD HOGS:** In wide release.

REVIVALS, CLASSICS, ETC.

Titles with a dagger are reviewed above.

ANTHOLOGY FILM ARCHIVES
32 Second Ave., at 2nd St. (212-505-5181)—Films from Canada. March 21-22 at 8: "John Porter's Slingshot Cinema," Super-8 films presented by Porter. ♦ Special screenings. March 23 at 7 and 8:30 and March 24-25 at 5:30, 7, and 8:30: "On the Bowery" (1956, Lionel Rogosin). ♦ First-person films from Boulder, Colorado. March 24-25 at 6:30: Short films, including "Black Ice" (1994, Stan Brakhage). ♦ "XX-Plicit." March 24 at 8:30: Short films, including "Fuses" (1964-67, Carolee Schneeman).

BAM ROSE CINEMAS
30 Lafayette Ave., Brooklyn (718-636-4100)—"Graham Greene Noir." March 21 at 4:30, 6:50, and 9:30: "Brighton Rock" (1947, John Boulting). The 6:50 screening will be followed by a discussion with the critic Elliott Stein. ♦ "Pimps, Prostitutes, and Pigs," the films of Shohei Imamura. All films are in Japanese. March 22 at 6 and 9: "The Pimp" (1987). ♦ March 23 at 3, 6, and 9: "Eijanaika" (1981). ♦ March 24 at 3, 6, and 9: "The Ballad of Narayama" (1983). ♦ March 25 at 3, 6, and 9: "Black Rain" (1989). ♦ March 26 at 4:30, 6:50, and 9:15: "My Second Brother" (1959). ♦ March 27 at 4:30, 6:50, and 9:15: "The Eel" (1997).

FILM FORUM
W. Houston St. west of Sixth Ave. (212-727-8110)—In revival. March 21-29 at 1, 3:10, 5:20, 7:30, and 9:30: "The Earrings of Madame de . . ." (1953, Max Ophüls; in French).

FRENCH INSTITUTE ALLIANCE FRANÇAISE
Florence Gould Hall, 55 E. 59th St. (212-355-6160)—"French Seventies: Cinema After May '68." All films are in French. March 23 at 7: "Molière" (†). ♦ March 27 at 12:30, 4, and 6:30: "Le Pont du Nord" (1982, Jacques Rivette). ♦ March 27 at 9: "The Mother and the Whore" (1973, Jean Eustache).

IFC CENTER
323 Sixth Ave., at W. 3rd St. (212-924-7771)—"Waverly Midnights." March 23-24: "Buffy the Vampire Slayer," a sing-along with an episode of the television show. ♦ "Stranger Than Fiction," a documentary series. March 27 at 7:30: "Office Tigers" (2007, Liz Mermin), introduced by the filmmaker.

MUSEUM OF MODERN ART
Roy and Niuta Titus Theatres, 11 W. 53rd St. (212-708-9480)—Through April 1: "New Directors/New Films." March 21 at 6: "The Inner Life of Martin Frost" (2007, Paul Auster). ♦ March 21 at 9: "Glue" (2006, Alexis Dos Santos; in Spanish). ♦ March 22 at 6: "El Custodio" (2006, Rodrigo Moreno; in Spanish). ♦ March 22 at 9: "Audience of One" (2006, Michael Jacobs). ♦ March 23 at 6: "Salty Air" (2006, Alessandro Angelini; in Italian). ♦ March 23 at 8:30: "Once" (2006, John Carney). ♦ March 24 at 1: "Shelter" (2006, Marco Simon Puccioni; in Italian). ♦ March 24 at 3:45: "Love for Sale: Suely in the Sky" (2006, Karim Aïnouz; in Portuguese). ♦ March 24 at 6:15: "7 Years" (2006, Jean-Pascal Hattu; in French). ♦ March 25 at 1: "What the Sun Has Seen" (2006, Michal Rosa; in Polish). ♦ March 25 at 3:45: "Cowboy Angels" (2007, Kim Massee; in French). ♦ March 25 at 6:30: "Red Road" (2006, Andrea Arnold). ♦ March 26 at 6: "War/Dance" (2007, Sean Fine and Andrea Nix Fine). ♦ March 26 at 8:45: "The Art of Crying" (2006, Peter Schønau Fog; in Danish).

MUSEUM OF THE MOVING IMAGE
35th Ave. at 36th St., Astoria (718-784-0077)—"Fashion in Film." March 24 at 2: "Model" (†). ♦ March 24 at 4:30: "Assuming a Pose," a short-film program, including "Four Beautiful Pairs" (1904, A. E. Weed; silent). ♦ March 24 at 5: "Lady with a Hat" (1999, Elsa Kvamme). ♦ March 24 at 7: "Who Are You, Polly Maggoo?" (1966, William Klein; in French) and "Ceiling" (1962, Vera Chytilová; in Czech). ♦ March 25 at 2: "Chop Suey" (2001, Bruce Weber). ♦ March 25 at 4:30: "Unzipped" (1995, Douglas Keeve). ♦ March 25 at 6:30: "True Stories" (1986, David Byrne).

PIONEER THEATRE
155 E. 3rd St. (212-591-0434)—Special screening. March 21 at 6:30: "Air Guitar Nation" (2006, Alexandra Lipsitz). ♦ In première. March 21-31 (call for showtimes): "Blessed by Fire" (2005, Tristán Bauer; in English and Spanish). ♦ March 21-31 (call for showtimes): "A Journey of Dmitry Shostakovich" (2006, Oksana Dvornichenko and Helga Landauer).

RUBIN MUSEUM OF ART
150 W. 17th St. (212-620-5000, ext. 344)—"Cabaret Cinema." March 23 at 9:30: "Wings of Desire" (1987, Wim Wenders; in German, English, and French), introduced by the writer S. T. VanAirsdale.

SUNSHINE CINEMA
143 E. Houston St. (212-330-8182)—"Sunshine@Midnight." March 23-24: "Spice World" (1997, B. Spiers).

THALIA THEATRE
Symphony Space, Broadway at 95th St. (212-864-5400)—"Thalia Film Classics." March 25 at 2 and 8 and March 27 at 5: "La Strada" (1954, Federico Fellini; in Italian).

WALTER READE THEATRE
Lincoln Center (212-875-5600)—"New Directors/New Films." March 22 at 6 and March 23 at 8:30: "Once" (2006, John Carney). ♦ March 22 at 8:30 and March 24 at 1: "The Inner Life of Martin Frost" (2007, Paul Auster). ♦ March 23 at 6: "Glue" (2006, Alexis Dos Santos; in Spanish). ♦ March 23 at 9: "Cowboy Angels" (2007, Kim Massee; in French). ♦ March 24 at 3:30: "War/Dance" (2007, Sean Fine and Andrea Nix Fine). ♦ March 24 at 6:15: "Audience of One" (2006, Michael Jacobs). ♦ March 24 at 8:45: "El Custodio" (2006, Rodrigo Moreno; in Spanish). ♦ March 25 at 3: "The Art of Crying" (2006, Peter Schønau Fog; in Danish). ♦ March

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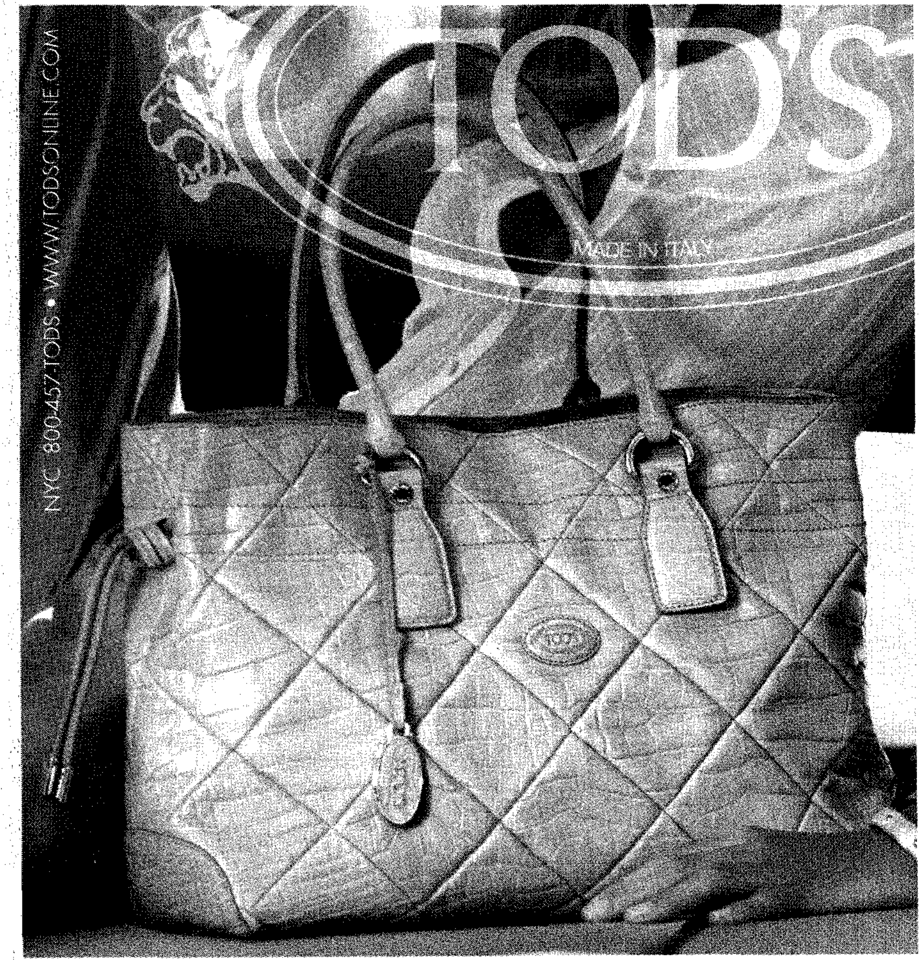

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READINGS AND TALKS

JEREMY SCAHILL
The author of "Blackwater: The Rise of the World's Most Powerful Mercenary Army" talks about the privatization of war with Naomi Klein, a columnist for *The Nation*, and Amy Goodman, the host of the independent radio and television news program "Democracy Now!" (New York Society for Ethical Culture, 2 W. 64th St. Tickets at the door. March 21 at 7.)

ESTHER KATZ
Katz, a professor of history at New York University, is also the editor of "The Selected Papers of Margaret Sanger" (Volumes 1-4). On March 21 at 7, she talks about the life and work of the family-planning advocate. (The Old Stone House, J. J. Byrne Park, Fifth Ave. at 3rd St., Brooklyn. For more information, call 718-768-3195 or visit www.theoldstonehouse.org.)

GAIL LEVIN
The author reads from "Becoming Judy Chicago," her new biography of the feminist artist. (Brooklyn Museum of Art, 200 Eastern Parkway. 718-638-5000. March 25 at 1.)

"POETS OUT LOUD"
Fordham University's reading series presents Christina Davis, Sharon Dolin, and Major Jackson. (113 W. 60th St., 12th fl. No tickets necessary. March 26 at 7:30.)

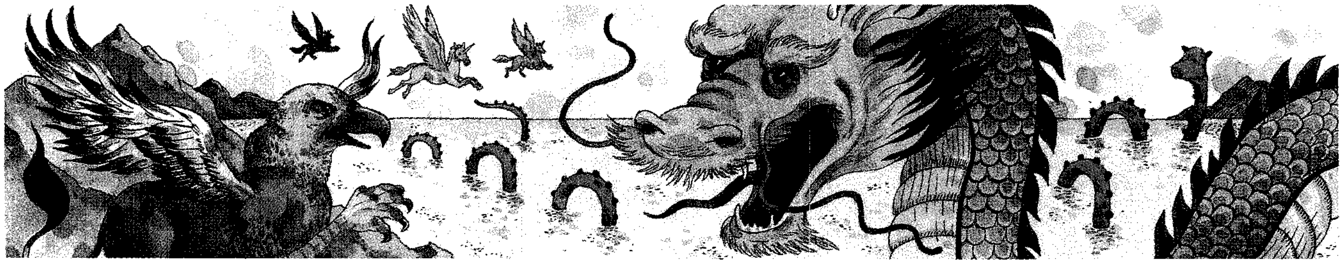
JOE BOYD
Boyd, a native Bostonian who went on to become a cornerman of English rock (he opened the psychedelic London club U.F.O., in 1966; produced the first single by its house band, Pink Floyd, a year later; and went on to discover Nick Drake), reads from his memoir, "White Bicycles: Making Music in the 1960s." He'll be joined by his friend the singer Geoff Muldaur and others. (Joe's Pub, 425 Lafayette St. 212-967-7555. March 27 at 7.)

ABOVE AND BEYOND

HOMAGE TO CATALONIA
At the Metropolitan Museum, Catalan fine art is on display in the exhibit "Barcelona and Modernity." A little farther downtown, music, poetry, and dance from Spain's northeastern corner come to life in a festival called "Made in CataluNYa: Catalan Culture in New York." Highlights follow. March 23-24 at 8:30: Lou Reed, Laurie Anderson, and Patti Smith read Catalan poetry. March 26 at 8:30: The dancer Sol Picó (see Dance). March 27 at 8:30: The pioneering free-jazz pianist Agustí Fernández. (Baryshnikov Arts Center, 450 W. 37th St. 212-279-4200. Through March 31.)

SOUTH STREET SEAPORT MUSEUM
In the fall of 2005, the Fulton Fish Market moved upstream from its historic East River location to a new home in the Bronx. Niama Rauam, an artist who spent more than two decades painting watercolors of the fishmongers, joins Jack Putnam, a former market worker who is now attached to the museum, for a look back. (12 Fulton St. 212-748-8568. March 25 at 2.)

AUCTIONS AND ANTIQUES
Big, brash works by a new wave of Chinese artists are arousing intense interest among well-heeled, cutting-edge collectors vying for their little piece of the Asian-art boom. **Sotheby's** capitalizes on this trend with its third annual sale of contemporary art from China, Korea, and Japan (March 21), which includes works by such artists as Yue Minjun, Ai Weiwei, and Zhang Xiaogang, whose painting "Bloodline: Three Comrades"—a faux-naïf, twenties-style portrait of two men and a woman, all wearing Red Guard banners on their sleeves—is the top lot here. The following day is devoted to Indian art, including miniatures and modern paintings by established figures such as Tyeb Mehta, S. H. Raza, and F. N. Souza. On the house's final day of Asian sales (March 23), Indian and Southeast Asian works of art will be offered, including a large granite figure of Shiva as Brahma, from the tenth or eleventh century. (York Ave. at 72nd St. 212-606-7000.) ♦ Asia Week continues at **Christie's**, with a sale of modern and contemporary Indian art (March 21) that features one of Tyeb Mehta's bold slash paintings, "Diagonal XV"; in the afternoon, the house's sale of Indian and Southeast Asian art is led by a selection from the holdings of the distinguished collector Thomas Solley. The following day (March 22) is devoted to sales of Chinese ceramics and works of art, as well as to an auction of snuff bottles from the extensive J & J collection. (20 Rockefeller Plaza, at 49th St. 212-636-2000.) ♦ The Haughton firm's **International Asian Art Fair** rounds out the city's vibrant Asian sales, with a wide variety of works offered by some fifty respected dealers. (7th Regiment Armory, Park Ave. at 67th St. 212-642-8572. March 23-28.)



ON THE HORIZON

THE THEATRE
MORE FUN
April 3

The recent mania for recycling movies as musicals has produced both hits ("Spamalot") and flops ("High Fidelity"). The trend continues with "Legally Blonde," based on the 2001 Reese Witherspoon film and directed by Jerry Mitchell. (212-307-4100.)

MOVIES
COMING-OUT PARTY
April 4-24

BAM's series of the best and the best-yet-undistributed films of 2006, cited in the inaugural indieWIRE critics' poll, offers an important roundup of world cinema, from Manoel de Oliveira's "Belle Toujours" and the New York première of Eugene Green's "Les Signes" to Nanni Moretti's anti-Berlusconi satire, "The Caiman," two films by the American director Robinson Devor, and films by Hong Sang-soo. (718-636-4100.)

CLASSICAL MUSIC
LONG DISTANCE
April 15

Leon Botstein goes where other conductors fear to tread. He leads the American Symphony Orchestra, with soloists, in the ridiculously delayed American première of Franz Schreker's "Der Ferne Klang," one of the most important operas of the early twentieth century. (212-721-6500.)

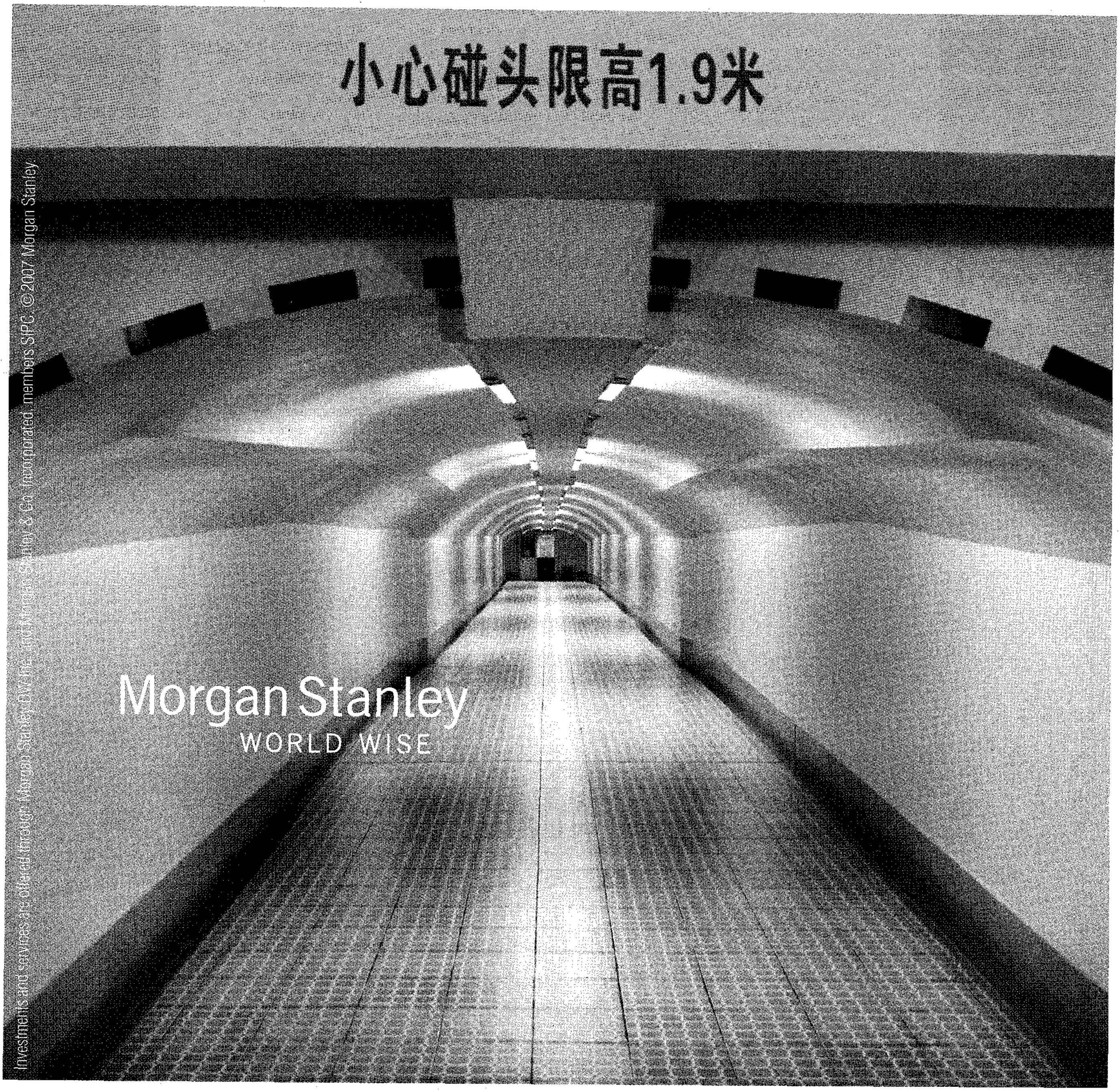
NIGHT LIFE
PROTEST SONGS
May 14-15

The veteran soul and gospel singer Mavis Staples sets up a two-night stand at the Apollo Theatre, backed by the Freedom Singers, the guitarist Ry Cooder, and the drummer Jim Keltner, the same folks who support her on her new release, "We'll Never Turn Back." (212-531-5300.)

ART
FACT AND FANTASY
May 26-Jan. 6, 2008

The scientific basis of legends is explored in the American Museum of Natural History's "Mythic Creatures: Dragons, Unicorns, and Mermaids." Fossils and specimens from narwhals, giant squid, and the like will be joined by puppets, masks, and models of cryptozoological beings. (212-769-5100.)

A show of fantastical creatures, at the American Museum of Natural History.



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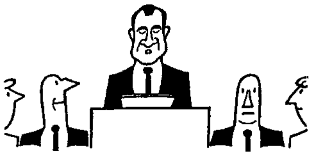
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

THE NEW YORKER

THE TALK OF THE TOWN

COMMENT
AUTHORIZATIONS



Last month, in *Air Force*, the journal of the Air Force Association, Patrick Casey, a criminal lawyer, and his father, Aloysius Casey, a retired Air Force lieutenant general, unravelled the truth of one of the demoralizing stories that, three decades ago, marked the end of a losing war. In April, 1972, the Pentagon announced that Air Force General John D. Lavelle, the commander of all air operations in Vietnam, was retiring for "personal and health reasons." In fact, as it became clear over the next two months, he had been relieved of his command and forced to retire—demoted by two ranks—after an internal inquiry determined that he had ordered bombing attacks on unauthorized targets in North Vietnam.

The news of Lavelle's dismissal was followed by several hearings before the Senate Armed Services Committee and two Pentagon investigations. At that stage of the war, American pilots were authorized to fire on surface-to-air-missile sites and their radar in the North—but only after they had been fired upon or electronically engaged. Once that happened, a rule of engagement known as "protective reaction" came into play, and the missiles and radar became fair game. During the hearings, many Air Force pilots and intelligence personnel came forward to say that they had bombed unauthorized targets and then falsely reported those attacks as "protective reaction"—a phrase that entered the Vietnam lexicon, alongside "free-fire zones" and "pacification." From late 1971 to early 1972, more than half the missions flown over North Vietnam—twenty-eight missions, involving a hundred and forty-seven flights—had been in violation of the rules of engagement.

I tracked Lavelle down after his firing, and, with his help, published an account of those missions, in the *Times*, on June 11, 1972. Lavelle told me that he had bombed radar sites, air fields, petroleum storage tanks, and other targets in the North without express orders. I also reported that he had verbal instructions that he thought carried an "implied" authorization. In the early fall, as the Pentagon continued to insist that Lavelle "alone was responsible for the air raids," he told the Armed Services Committee that he had discussed the SAM sites and radars with Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird and various senior commanders, including Army General Creighton T. Abrams, who was then in charge of the over-all war effort. Lavelle said that he and Abrams had agreed that the Air Force could not "just stand around" and wait until a plane was shot down. Abrams denied this; he told the committee that he had approved one early attack that was subsequently determined to be in violation of the rules of engagement, but had not known of any other such missions. (Lavelle later stated that Laird had encouraged him to make a "liberal interpretation" of the rules, and had promised to "back me up.")

The issue of authorization was lost amid bigger stories—Richard Nixon's reëlection, the collapse of the Paris peace agreement, and the spreading Watergate scandal—and was never resolved. Lavelle and twenty-three others were accused of court-martial offenses, but the Secretary of the Air Force found no cause to take further action. ("When was the last time you heard of a four-star general being court-martialled?" Lavelle said to me, when we first talked.) In 1978, Lavelle gave an extensive interview to the Office of Air Force History, in which he said that he should not have acted on the basis of private assurances that he would

ILLUSTRATIONS BY TOM BACHTELL

be supported if the missions became known. He added, "Somewhere along there we just should have said, 'Hey, either fight it or quit, but let's not waste all the money and the lives the way we are doing it.' " A year later, Lavelle died, at the age of sixty-two.

Patrick and Aloysius Casey discovered the story behind the protective-reaction attacks while researching a biography of a pilot who served under Lavelle. The authorization came from the Oval Office; the Caseys found the evidence that Lavelle had done and continued to do what the President wanted in recently released Nixon White House tapes, and they gave me a copy of their transcripts. On February 3, 1972, President Nixon; Henry Kissinger, the national-security adviser; and Ellsworth Bunker, the Ambassador to South Vietnam, were discussing the war. "The one thing both General Abrams and I want is . . . authority to bomb these SAM sites," Bunker said. Nixon had a solution: "I think protective reaction should include the right to hit SAM sites. I am simply saying that we expand the definition of protective reaction to mean preventive reaction where a SAM site is concerned. . . . Who knows or would say they didn't fire?" It was agreed that Abrams would be told. "Needless to say," Nixon cautioned, "he is to call all of these things protective reaction." Kissinger worried about a leak to the press. The President said to Bunker, "I want you to tell Abrams when you get back that he is to tell the military not to put out extensive briefings with regard to our military activities. . . . And if it does get out, he is to say it's a protective-reaction strike."

On June 14th, shortly after my first article on the bombings appeared in the *Times*, Nixon said to Kissinger, "This damned Laird." He was referring to Laird's decision to dismiss Lavelle. "Why did he even remove him?. . . I don't want a man persecuted for doing what he thought was right." Kissinger was quick to criticize the generals: "Of course the military are impossible, too. . . . They turn on each other like rats." Nixon thought that he had been double-crossed. "Laird knows goddam well. . . . I told him, 'I said it's protective reaction.' He winks, he says, 'Oh, I understand.' " Kissinger: "Yeah, but Laird is pretty vicious."

Twelve days later, Nixon raised his concerns again. Kissinger said that Nixon had really not changed the rules, because the first raids, in late 1971, were "not protective reaction in a strict sense, it was a punishment for [Hanoi's] acts and that had to be made clear." He added, "I don't think Lavelle was pushed into anything. I think Lavelle did it on an unauthorized basis." "You do?" the President asked. Kissinger continued, "In any event you should stay out of it, Mr. President." Nixon agreed, more or less: "Well, I suppose . . . they"—the Democrats—"figure, Lavelle, it is just another card [like] the bugging of the [Democratic] National Committee."

Finally, on October 23rd, Nixon told General Alexander Haig, Kissinger's deputy, "All this goddam crap about Lavelle. I feel sorry for that fellow because you and I know we did approve to Laird of 'protective reaction' as being very liberal." He added, "He never would have had to falsify any records if we had not had rules out that we were not to bomb the North."

We have become inured to the vulgarity, deceit, and distrust that mark the Nixon tapes. But the Lavelle incident has a special resonance: in the midst of a disastrous and unpopular war, a President and his closest confederates authorized actions in violation of both the rules and their own stated policies. We'll never know exactly what has been said in George W. Bush's Oval Office, but there are parallels with the Nixon White House. One who has come to understand them is Robert Pursley, the Air Force lieutenant general who was Laird's military assistant. Laird, who will publish a memoir next year, insists, "I did not know they were breaking the rules or lying about coördinates." Pursley said last week that it was Laird's office that noticed the increase in bombing missions over North Vietnam and questioned the Joint Chiefs of Staff about the authority used to justify it, which led to the Pentagon's first, internal inquiry. Pursley also told me, "I believe Lavelle was guilty of poor judgment, but Nixon enhanced the issue by saying, 'Do what you need to do.' That's what's wrong with us today. The President is just diminishing what holds the military together by saying forget the ethics—we'll do whatever we have to do. It's the stuff from which Walter Reed and Abu Ghraib are born."

—*Seymour M. Hersh*

WIND ON CAPITOL HILL
BULLETS

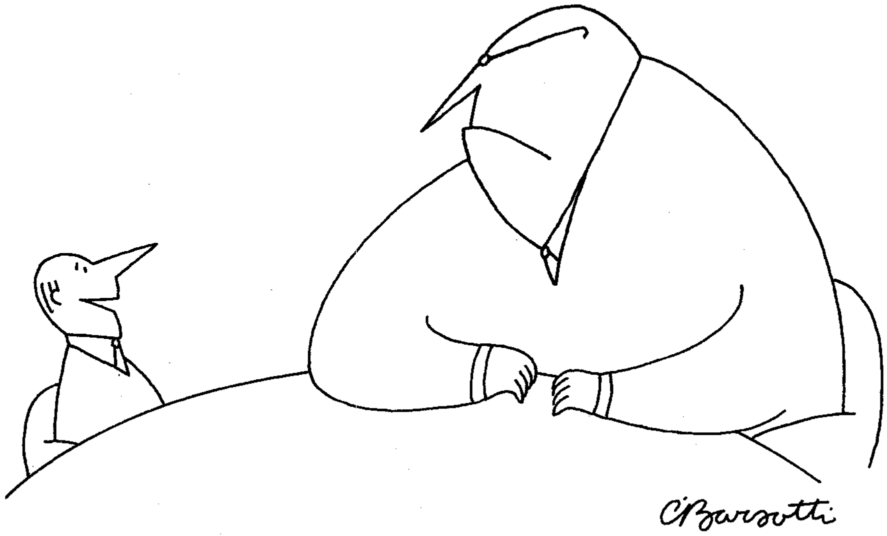
Ordinarily, few jobs in the legal world are as exalted and exhilarating as being a United States Attorney. But last week Tim Griffin, the recently installed U.S. Attorney for the Eastern District of Arkansas, was not enjoying his new assignment. "It's no fun being me right now," he said over his cell phone from Arkansas. Griffin is one of eight U.S. Attorneys whose recent appointments by the President are at the center of a political controversy that has overtaken Attorney General Alberto Gonzales and other top Bush Administration officials. They stand accused of manipulating the prosecutorial arm of the federal government for political purposes, and then misleading Congress about it. Griffin complained that his Democratic opponents had unfairly accused him of political partisanship. "I worked in a campaign, like a lot of people," he said. "But now my job is not partisan, so I am not partisan."

Griffin, who is thirty-eight, was appointed U.S. Attorney in December. A former research director for the Republican National Committee and an aide to Karl Rove, the White House political adviser, Griffin had relatively little prosecutorial experience. Nonetheless, e-mails between Justice Department and White House officials show that Bush Administration officials pushed out Griffin's well-respected predecessor, H. E. (Bud) Cummins, to make room for Griffin, in part because "it was important to . . . Karl [Rove], etc." Griffin did not undergo a confirmation process before the Senate Judiciary Committee, as is required by the Constitution. Instead, the President appointed him under a little-noticed provision of the 2006 renewal of the Patriot Act, which allows for the indefinite appointment of an interim U.S. Attorney without Senate approval. Ostensibly, the provision was intended to be used in situations where national security might be at stake, such as the death of a sitting U.S. Attorney resulting from a terrorist attack.

As early as last summer, Justice Department officials worried that Griffin's past as an opposition researcher for the Republicans might make him unconfirmable. (A Justice Department staffer wrote in an e-mail, in reference to the plan to install Griffin, "We have a senator prob.") In congressional hearings last month, Mark Pryor, a Democratic senator from Arkansas, raised concerns about newspaper accounts of Griffin's political work, which, he said, has "been characterized as 'caging' African-American votes. This arises from allegations that Mr. Griffin and others in the R.N.C. were targeting African-Americans in Florida for voter challenges during the 2004 Presidential campaign."

Last week, Griffin was intent upon defending himself against the charge of suppressing minority votes. "Caging is not a derogatory term," he said, as soon as he got on the phone."It's a direct-mail term. It derives from caging categories of mail in steel shelves and files." He said that the implication that he had run an operation to suppress African-American voters, which could be a violation of the 1965 Voting Rights Act, was "false and close to libelous." (News accounts suggest that one reason that some of the purged U.S. Attorneys were fired is that Republican officials had complained to the Administration that they weren't energetic enough about investigating "voter fraud"—political shorthand, critics say, for delegitimatizing minority votes.)

Few U.S. Attorneys are better equipped than Griffin to dodge incoming political artillery, because few have launched more of it themselves. As Griffin put it in a BBC documentary called "Digging the Dirt," which featured the opposition-research outfit that he helped run for George Bush in his Presidential race against Al Gore, in 2000, "We think of ourselves as the creators of the ammunition in a war. . . . We make the bullets." The documentary showed Griffin leading a team of researchers focussed on spotting inconsistencies, no matter how inconsequential, in Gore's statements, and packaging them for the media.



"A charm offensive—why didn't I think of that?"

In 2004, Griffin reprised the role, leading the behind-the-scenes effort to disseminate negative information about John Kerry, the Democratic Presidential nominee. As Rove's protégé, he set up a boiler-room rapid-response operation at 129 Portland Street, in Boston. Security was tight, with guards and a buzzer system. Upstairs, thirty operatives worked in a maze of offices filled with computers and TVs. Among other things, the Republicans scrutinized Kerry's parking violations and unearthed old gossip items and tabloid accounts of his troubled first marriage.

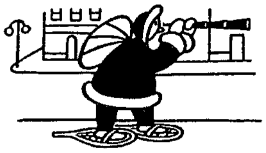
On the phone, Griffin suggested that his experience with the media would be an asset in his new job. "A lot of what I do is communications," he said. "It's no different than in the campaign."

Senator Pryor doesn't see things that way. "Doing opposition research shouldn't disqualify a person from being a U.S. Attorney," he said. "But the question is what political activities he did—and did he break the law? Were they suppressing the African-American vote? He says not, but that's why we need confirmation hearings." Pryor said that the Attorney General had assured him in a phone call that he wanted Griffin to face Senate confirmation. But now, Pryor said, "the e-mails show it was just the opposite. The truth is, I was lied to." As a result, last week Pryor, who was one of only six Democratic senators to support Gonzales's nomination and confirmation as Attorney General, joined the call for his resignation. He has also co-sponsored legislation that, if passed, will force Griffin to undergo a retroactive confirmation hearing.

"I'm not interested in that," Griffin said. "I don't feel bad about the work we did. I'm proud of it. It's research! It's their record—I didn't make anything up." But as a man whose headquarters during the 2000 campaign was decorated with a banner that read, "Unleash Hell on Al," he seemed to realize that he would most likely have to face the same kind of treatment that he is known for dishing out. Given that Democrats now rule the Senate, he asked, "Do you think I could get a fair hearing?"

—*Jane Mayer*

BETTER LATE DEPT.
TRUE NORTH



The American explorer Robert Peary reached the North Pole on April 6, 1909. With him were four Eskimos—Oatah, Egingwah, Seegloo, and Ookeah—and Matthew Henson, an African-American guide. To Barbara Hillary, Henson is both a hero and a goad. Hillary is seventy-five, and a resident of Arverne, Queens. On April 20th, she will disembark from the Borneo ice camp, towing a fifty-pound sled and the wish to become the first African-American woman on record to set foot on the top of the world.

Hillary—who has a squat build and a powerhouse smile—was born in the San Juan Hill neighborhood of Manhattan (now near the site of Lincoln Center) and brought up in Harlem. Her father died when she was a baby. While her mother cleaned houses to support the family, Hillary immersed herself in books about endurance under extreme circumstances. "Survival 101 was 'Robinson Crusoe,' " she said the other day, before beginning her daily workout at the Cyberzone gym in Rockaway Park.

Hillary was a nurse for fifty-five years. "I always had dreams of travel," she said. "But much of travel, as I saw it, was so sheeplike, so John Doe." In 1992, she decided to take her first trip abroad, alone. (Hillary has never married, and, along with "one, Mind your own business; two, Maintain a sense of humor; and three, Tell an individual to go to hell when it's needed," she credits her air of youthfulness to remaining single.) "I looked around for a place that was affordable in air travel yet somehow virginal in terms of stampedes of tourists," she recalled. She considered Guyana. "When I called the consulate, the woman said, in a very curt manner, 'Why are you coming to our country?' And that was the worst thing she could have said. I was Guyana-bound!" Since then, Hillary has dogsledded in Minnesota and travelled to Manitoba to photograph polar bears. London, Paris? "You can go there when you're propped up in a casket," she said.

The North Pole trek, which Hillary intends to undertake with an outfit from Georgia called Eagles Cry Adventures, will require of its participants, once they've been deposited on a moving ice floe by an MI-8 helicopter, eight to ten hours of skiing on three consecutive days. To prepare, Hillary has been engaging in what she calls "preventative maintenance." She tried lugging a loaded-up plastic sled on the beach, but the sand shredded the bottom. Now she has settled on a regimen of increased vegetable consumption, vitamin intake, and treadmill-and-weight-lifting sessions at Cyberzone. (She used to box at a gym called Irish Ropes, but it closed.) She has been skiing at some slopes in New Jersey. There is nothing she's afraid of, she said, except religious people.

Hillary's preparedness does not extend to the financial demands (equally rigorous) of her expedition. Initially, the trip was to cost about sixteen thousand dollars. "I could've swung it," she said. "Maybe I would've had to switch to dog food the last couple of weeks." In July, she learned that the price had risen to twenty-two thousand dollars, owing to currency fluctuations and increased operating costs for the Russians who run the base camp. So far, she has cobbled together thirteen thousand dollars. In the hope of getting sponsorships, she has petitioned organizations—the Coalition of One Hundred Black Women, *Ebony,* the Mayor's Office—to little avail. "Mayor Bloomberg referred me to the Department for the Aging, which sent a form letter of things I could do in the senior center," she said. "Mister, don't you get it? If I'm going to the North Pole, why the hell do I need a senior center?"

Assuming, as Hillary does, that the funds materialize, she flies out of Newark to Longyearbyen, Norway, on April 16th. And plans for her next trip are already shaping up. "All the people who didn't believe in me—I'd like to go to the South Pole and give 'em the one-two punch!" she said. She took a swig from a bottle of water and headed off to do some overhead presses.

—*Lauren Collins*

THE BENCH COMEBACK

The annual luncheon of the New York Council of Defense Lawyers is usually an amiable schmoozefest over chicken cutlets. But at the event the other day, at the Grand Hyatt, the introduction of this year's guest speaker reduced the group of notoriously voluble attorneys to a respectful silence. Just about everyone in the room had heard of Anthony G. Amsterdam, but few had ever seen him in the flesh. There before them was the legal world's Thomas Pynchon.

Amsterdam had once been among the most famous lawyers in the country. In 1972, as a thirty-six-year-old professor at Stanford Law School, he argued and won one of the most important cases in the history of the Supreme Court. In Furman v. Georgia, the Justices struck down all of the death-penalty statutes then in effect, halting executions in the United States. Amsterdam's achievement is widely believed to rank with Thurgood Marshall's triumphs in school desegregation, even though four years later Amsterdam lost Gregg v. Georgia, which allowed states to pass death-penalty statutes again. On other key issues, such as freedom of speech, there was no more visible champion than Amsterdam.

Then, in 1981, Amsterdam moved to New York University, and his public appearances, if not his legend, dwindled. "When N.Y.U. announced he was coming from Stanford, it was like when the Mets got Pedro Martínez, because he was a superstar," Paul B. Bergman, the president of the council, said. "And since then he's become this ethereal presence." In a rare departure, Amsterdam accepted the invitation of the council to present an award to Barry Scheck and Peter Neufeld—the founders of the Innocence Project, which uses DNA technology to free wrongfully convicted prisoners—who are as ubiquitous as Amsterdam is reclusive.

Now seventy-one, Amsterdam is thin and wizened—he didn't touch his lunch—and his face is dominated by a bushy mustache and large plastic eyeglasses. He looks like a vaudevillian. Amsterdam isn't the kind of speaker who loosens up the crowd with a few jokes. "I am not talking about individual judges," he said. "I am talking about something more systemic and radical. We have witnessed a subversion of the very idea that criminal defendants have rights. The blindfold that Justice is supposed to wear to assure that cases are decided with indifference to the outcome has been shredded. Now, as a matter of law, judges are required to peep through the blindfold, survey the outcomes which their rulings would produce, and tip the scales to avoid unwelcome outcomes, most notably the releases or even the retrials of guilty-looking perps."

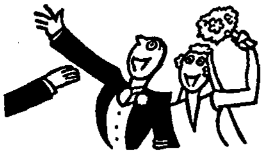
Amsterdam's theme—that the rights of criminal defendants have eroded in recent years—was not original, but he pulled together disparate strands in the law in a novel and forceful way. He said that courts ignore errors by defense lawyers, dismiss procedural errors as "harmless," cast aside exculpatory evidence discovered after trial, and seize on "every possible procedural obstacle to refuse to hear the claims of people who present convincing evidence that their convictions were factually erroneous, and that they are actually innocent." Almost sneering, Amsterdam said that courts care most about the "finality" of criminal convictions, and then he asked, "Finality for whom?" He said that his clients had not "experienced any final end to the consequences of their convictions. After this great victory for finality was declared, many of them have been electrocuted or strapped on a gurney and poisoned to death and others have spent lifetimes in prison."

Amsterdam's pervasive gloominess left even the sympathetic crowd of lawyers disconcerted. When he finished, the applause was understated. Scheck, accepting his award, was more upbeat, noting that last year's midterm elections, as well as his own group's many successes, pointed to a change in the national temperament. After the lunch was over, Amsterdam did not sound convinced.

"It's true that history has moved in a pendulum, and we may be moving a little toward humanity, toward egalitarianism," he said. "But we've gone so far in the other direction that it will take a long, long time to get back." Still, he insisted that his own long silence did not signal a retreat. "At any given time, I've got forty death cases around the country that need my attention," he said. "That's how I'm spending my time."

—*Jeffrey Toobin*

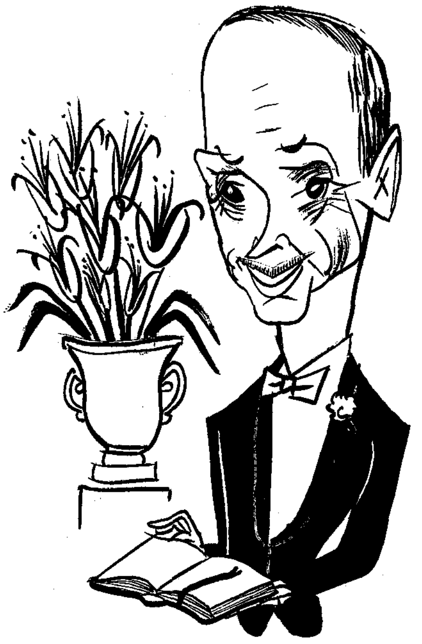
SIDELINES
THE GROOM REAPER



The founding principle of the Universal Life Church, which was begun in 1959 in Modesto, California, by a renegade Baptist minister, is that the legal and social privileges traditionally enjoyed by men of the cloth—the right to perform marriages among them—should be available to all. To that end, the church has enrolled more than eighteen million ministers, many of them since the advent of the Internet, which has made becoming a legally ordained minister easier than placing an order with FreshDirect. A basic ministerial package from the church, which includes a certificate with gold seal, suitable for framing, costs ten dollars; for an additional five dollars, U.L.C. ministers can apply for one of about a hundred and fifty religious titles, including Cardinal, Lama, Reverend Mother, Swami, Magus, Martyr, Goddess, Angel, or Apostle of Humility.

It comes as little surprise to learn that John Waters—who in 1986 was nominated by William Burroughs, free of charge, as the Pope of Trash—is one of the eighteen million. "I did it when we were making 'Cry-Baby,' because at the time Johnny Depp and Winona Ryder were going to be married, and Johnny's lawyers asked me to be ordained," Waters explained the other day over breakfast—half a poppy-seed bagel, with lox spread—at his apartment in Greenwich Village. "I think Winona and Johnny wanted to add a twist to it. I met her parents. I met his parents." That wedding never took place, but Waters has gone on to perform thirteen ceremonies; the most recent was last summer, near his house in Provincetown. "I have only one divorce out of thirteen," he said. "But I try not to do it too much anymore. People want me to write witty ceremonies, which I don't do now. I let them write it. And I charge seven dollars, in cash, and report it on my tax return. They have to give me correct change."

This week, Waters appears in a new comedy series entitled "'Til Death Do Us Part," on Court TV. Each episode charts the progress of a couple's romance from the altar to the courthouse, where, several years later, one spouse is accused of murdering the other. The cases are based on real couples, and, in a macabre framing device, Waters appears each week as a narrator called the Groom Reaper. "This is a pro-divorce show," Waters explained. "The viewer might have wanted to kill his wife right before this show, because who hasn't? That's why I am single. Someone thought up an ad campaign for the show—'Stay single and stay alive'—which I love." Waters, whose pied-à-terre has one bedroom and is decorated entirely in shades of dark green, with Venetian blinds permanently drawn, has never even lived with a partner, let alone considered legalizing any of his unions. "I always thought the privilege of being gay is that we don't have to get married or go in the Army," he said. "I personally have no desire to imitate a fairly corny, expensive heterosexual tradition, though I certainly know gay couples who are married who should be. I am all for it. I have always joked that the growth industries are gay divorce and tattoo removal."



John Waters

In spite of his occasional willingness to play the ministerial role, Waters says that he hates going to weddings. "I am hoping that one of the best things that will happen if this show is a success is that people will stop inviting me," he said. "Weddings are never fun. You cannot have that much fun with your friends and your family all together, spending that much money. You are putting an unfair burden on your romance by imagining that this ridiculous Hallmark-greeting-card love thing is actually going to work. I don't understand the whole process: the poor girl has to go out and buy, with her own money, some dress that she will never wear again; you go out with the man the night before and he is allowed to get blow jobs from hookers. It seems to me that's a reason to break up with someone, not to marry him. And the idea that it's supposed to be the happiest day of your life? I had a big sixtieth-birthday party. What's the difference? You pay for a big party and you have fun at it. But I didn't expect that it was going to make me fifty again."

—*Rebecca Mead*

ONWARD AND UPWARD WITH THE ARTS

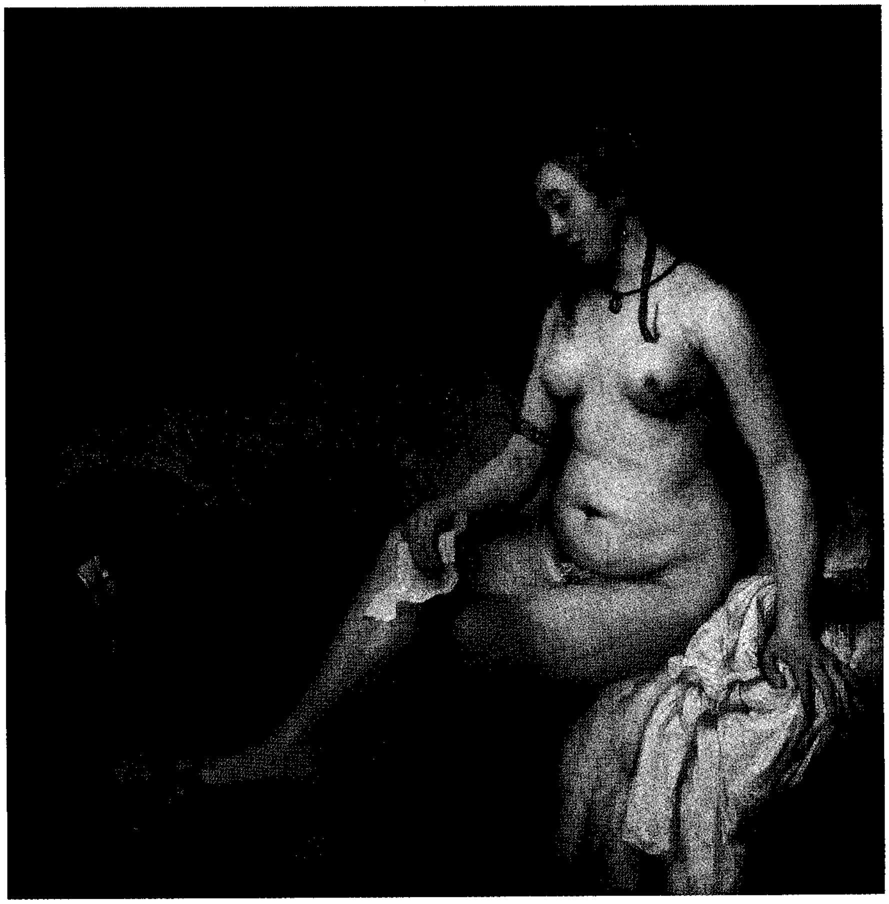
REMBRANDT'S GHOST

Picasso looks back.

BY SIMON SCHAMA

In April, 1973, the month that Picasso died, he was asked to choose an image to be used as a poster for a show of recent work at the Palace of the Popes, in Avignon. He picked "The Young Painter," an oil sketch he'd done a year earlier, at the age of ninety—a vision of his dewy beginnings, not his bitter end. The look is naïve and apparently artless, but the hand that draws it is heavy with memories, not just of a Barcelona boyhood but of the archive of painting. The apple-cheeked youth recalls another young painter at the outset of his career, the twenty-three-year-old Rembrandt, picturing himself and his calling around 1629, in a panel not much bigger than this page. The faces are unmistakably similar: gingerbread-clownish beneath a wide-brimmed hat; snub nose; eyes stylized as ogling black holes, as if drawn by a child. The captured moment, in both images, is solemn; the young men pause before their work, brushes in hand, as if locked in a creative trance. A raking light, the illumination of an idea, strikes their faces. "I don't paint what I see," Picasso was given to saying. "I paint what I know." Rembrandt, his picture tells us, felt the same way: the mind instructing the hand.

It was an unlikely pairing—the cerebral modernist who had made a point of expelling sentiment from painting going wistful over the master whose every brush mark was loaded with emotion. But the fixation was real. The shelves in Picasso's



Rembrandt's "Bathsheba" (1654) and Picasso's "Seated Nude and Another Figure" (1963): Picasso's riffs on Rembrandt are all about lusty gazing.

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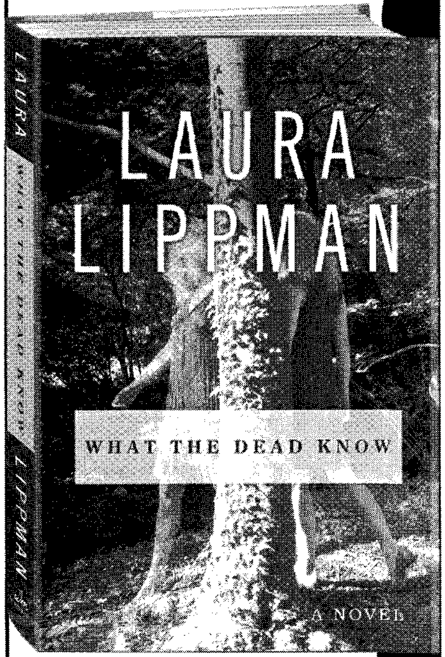

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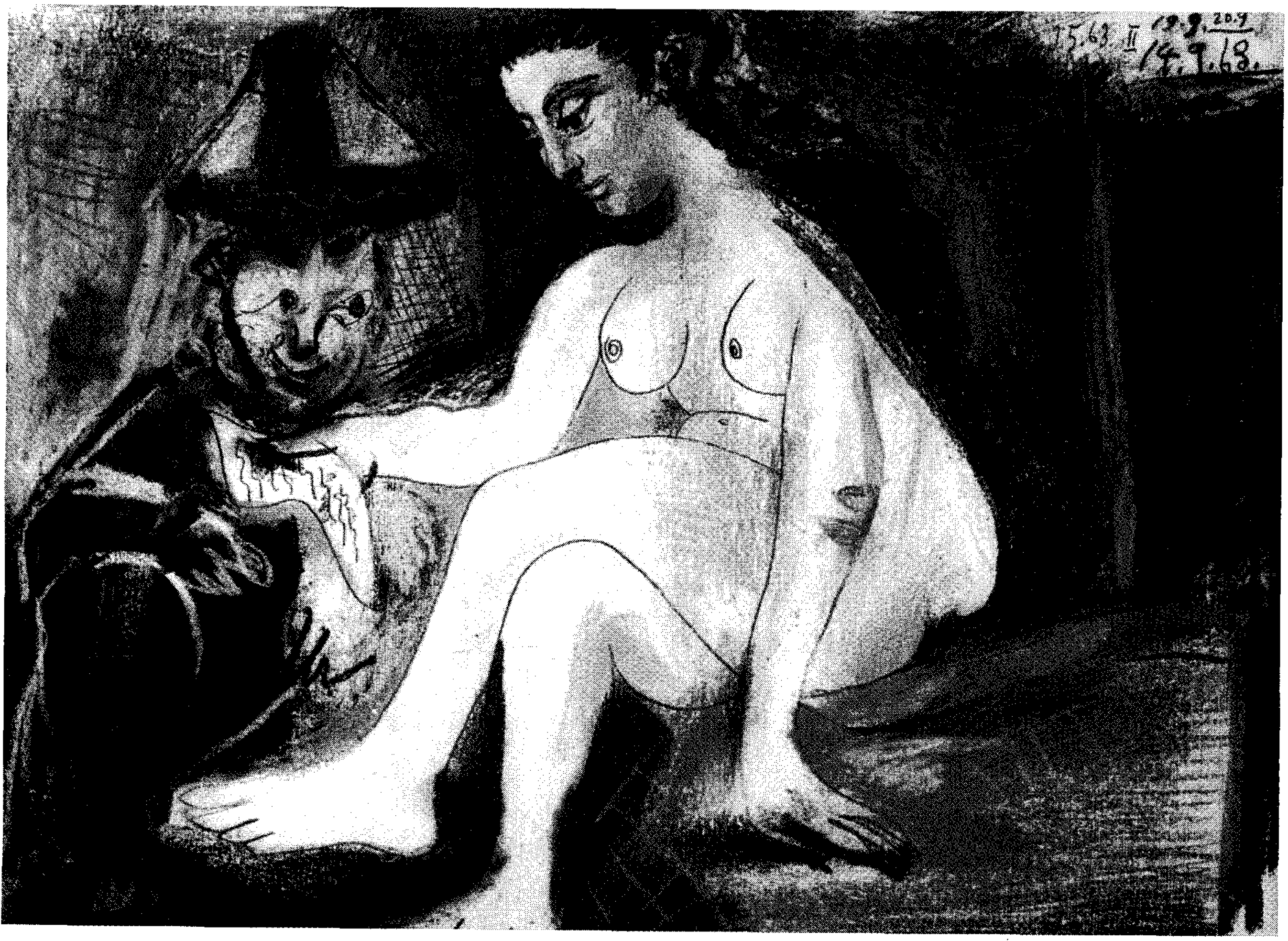
studio at Mougins, in the South of France, were packed with Rembrandtiana, including all six volumes of Otto Benesch's edition of the drawings. And though Picasso could not have seen Rembrandt's little panel first-hand (it was in Boston), he must have plucked that archetypal image of setting forth from one of his books. Radical remaker of art though he was, Picasso always balanced his iconoclastic instincts with a compulsive historicism. In 1936, he had agreed to become absentee director of the Prado, while Madrid was under Fascist siege. Constantly measuring himself for admission to the pantheon, Picasso evidently felt that taking down the masters also meant taking them on, and in his time he had mixed it up with, among others, Grünewald, Poussin, Cranach, Velázquez, Goya, and El Greco. At the end, though, it was Rembrandt of whom, according to his friend and biographer Pierre Cabanne, he spoke "ceaselessly." The haunted self-portraits of those final years, all stubble and cavernous eye sockets, were surely prompted by the series of pitilessly truthful mirror images that Rembrandt executed in his last decade: a dispassionate scrutiny of time's ruin recorded in heavy jowls and pouches. Occasionally, as in the self-portrait as St. Paul (in the Rijksmuseum), Rembrandt arched his eyebrows in an expression of quizzical self-recognition, the chastened sinner who might yet imagine redemption. Picasso's face-making, on the other hand, is showy with self-contempt: so many glaring skulls.

Rembrandt first appeared in Picasso's visual imagination in the nineteen-thirties, as Janie Cohen points out in her essay "Picasso's Dialogue with Rembrandt's Art," in the volume "Etched on the Memory," at a time when the Spanish artist was making an ambitious "suite" of a hundred prints for the dealer Ambroise Vollard. Two qualities in Rembrandt's printmaking had sparked a sense of comradeship across the centuries. First, there was the experimental freedom that Rembrandt allowed himself—sketching ideas on the etching plate and then reworking them, adding other designs, sometimes related and sometimes not—so that the over-all image developed organically. A "trial" etching might have a face, a tree, and a single eye (his eye) on the same plate, and Picasso imagined this multiplicity of visions as an antecedent for his collage play with discontinuous fragments of objects. But Picasso also identified with Rembrandt's complicated relationship with his models, making them objects, indistinguishably, of aesthetic curiosity and erotic possession.

Picasso's riffs on Rembrandt are all about lusty looking; in his version of Rembrandt's "Jupiter and Antiope," he casts himself as the horned "Faun Unveiling a Sleeping Woman," one hand lifting a bedsheet, the other reaching for a voluptuous breast. Rembrandt's original is in fact a bolder and weirder exercise in erotic inspection, the god in faun form leaning over the woman's gently exposed nakedness with an expression of disconcerting benevolence. His gaze, emphasized by a touch of deep-scored drypoint at the eyes, is concentrated entirely on the darkly cross-hatched groin, whose details Rembrandt (after Titian the greatest soft-porn tease in art) has made tantalizingly invisible. But it's Rembrandt who takes most pains to wipe any hint of the ornamental



LEFT: RÉUNION DES MUSÉES NATIONAUX/ART RESOURCE; RIGHT: ©2007 ESTATE OF PABLO PICASSO/ARS, NY

from his nude. Antiope's chubby chin is lifted, her mouth slightly opened as if in a snore, snouty nostrils upturned, an arm wrapped about her head exposing tufts of armpit hair. Picasso, too much the fastidious classicist to linger on armpits, merely summarizes the sleeper's face, in the manner of his countless nude paintings of his mistress Marie-Thérèse Walther.

These two obsessions—experimental printmaking and the gaze of disingenuous desire—came together at one serendipitous moment. In 1934, while Picasso was preparing a plate with multiple profiles of Marie-Thérèse, the etching ground cracked. According to his friend and dealer Daniel-Henri Kahnweiler, Picasso improvised around the accident precisely the way Rembrandt was thought to have done in his free-form "sketchpad" plates, some of which anthologized different images of his wife, Saskia. "I said to myself: it's ruined," Picasso noted. "I'm going to do any old thing on it. I began to scribble. It became Rembrandt." The doodle did turn into Rembrandt's face, though in all likelihood it wasn't quite the pure accident that Picasso made it out to be. Because his plate of the Marie-Thérèses recalls the Saskias, he was probably, at some level, thinking of Rembrandt before he'd even begun. But, once Rembrandt was summoned, he and Picasso became one and the same. Rembrandt's face on that etching grafts him in the prime of his smiling self-congratulation—complete with curly whiskers and feathered beret—onto the puffier, double-chinned visage of Picasso's own middle age.

Looking at these "Rembrandt" prints a few years later, Picasso dryly commented to his mistress Françoise Gilot that "every painter takes himself for Rembrandt." He was right. No artist in the Western canon, not Raphael, not Michelangelo, not even Goya, has been so compulsively co-opted as heroic alter ego as Rembrandt. Painters like Turner, Delacroix, and van Gogh, who self-consciously saw themselves as Rembrandt's apostles, believed that he, more than any other artist, had modelled forms with light and color rather than with line. The luminous shimmer of paint, not the hard-edged purity of classical sculpture, was their lodestar, and no one, they thought, had liberated its radiance quite like Rembrandt.

There was, to be sure, a good deal of romantic projection involved in seeing Rembrandt as the patriarch of painterly integrity. The poignant trajectory of his biography, from precocious swagger to humiliation, satisfied a sentimental craving for punished temerity. And, while many of the early stories were fanciful (for example, his self-taught simplicity, when in fact he attended both Latin School and, briefly, Leiden University), the documented facts played directly into a narrative of heroic, if not reckless, innovation: the miller's son, mugging in the mirror to get the passions right for his history paintings, and plucked from obscurity by the Prince of Orange's talent scout; the dizzy ascent to fame and riches in money-drunk sixteen-thirties Amsterdam, the supermarket of the world; the free-spending owner of prime real estate, dressing himself and his wife in morally dubious poses; a painter who pushed conventions, especially in portraiture and group portraiture; the crash into insolvency and the death of Saskia, of children, of Hendrickje, the companion of his later years; the man, in his sixties, staring again into the mirror, the mugging gone and only humble self-recognition left.

But for every romantic who saw in this career an original free spirit, the inventor of *l'art pour l'homme*, there were severe classicists who condemned his naturalism as self-indulgence. They despised his juvenile relish for the seamier side of the human condition: urinating beggars and babies, cellulite-heavy nudes; copulating lovers in a bed, a fornicating monk in a cornfield. They detested the way he rubbed their noses in a gleeful mixture of the sacred and the profane. Was it really necessary to have a dog defecate in front of the Good Samaritan? It was precisely this contempt for academic propriety—and for the sacred hierarchy of the genres, with its disdain for importing the rawness of daily life into the refined matter of history paintings—which made Rembrandt a hero to the romantics.

The default mode of modern writing about art is to despise any notion of singularity as so much overheated genius-fetishism. So the idea that Rembrandt was the original democrat of subject matter—a maverick who flouted convention to follow the bidding of his muse, and who did push the boundaries of what painting (or, for that matter, printmaking) could do well beyond any contemporary conventions—is dismissed as sentimental anachronism. Perhaps that accounts for the fact that, during the quatercentenary commemorations of his birth, last year, so little attention was paid to what might be called "the Rembrandt afterglow." In this coolly empirical view, wary of perpetuating platitudes—such as his supposed indifference to the "rules" of art, his rough way with some patrons, the self-consciously dramatic manipulation of his paint—the historical Rembrandt was attentive to his patrons and gregari-

"I'm guessing it's too soon in the relationship for me to totally creep you out."

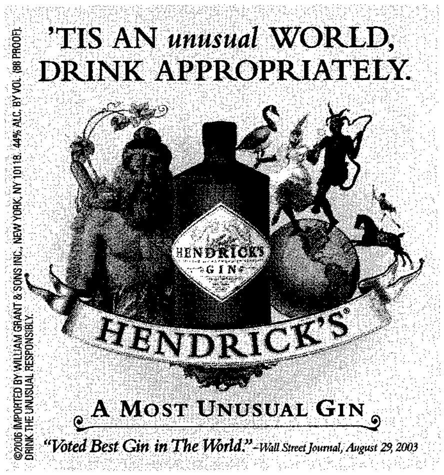
ous rather than misanthropic, and abided by the rules of art far more than he sought to violate them. But Gary Schwartz's superb new "The Rembrandt Book" makes plain the disputes between Rembrandt and his patrons over the displeasing difference between what they thought they had commissioned and the delivered work. So it may well be the case that Rembrandt the sociable conformist is more mythical than Rembrandt the "heretic" (as one of his classicist critics puts it). It has never been in doubt that he willfully offended classical principles of decorum. Fifty years ago, Seymour Slive's "Rembrandt and His Critics" analyzed the strong responses to Rembrandt in the name of upholding the norms of classical decorum. Classicism's first principle decreed that only the representation of ideal forms could give art universal authority, while Rembrandt, these critics asserted, believed the opposite: that only a shockingly unedited version of natural truth could serve art's highest purpose.

This makes Picasso's attraction to Rembrandt even odder, for the Spanish artist was far more of a classicist than a Romantic. Picasso's work of the nineteen-twenties and thirties is populated by drawn and painted meditations on the endurance of classicism, and no one performed exercises in the economy of classical line with more elegant finesse. But Picasso was a classicist with a difference: an artist capable of recalling the elements of ideal form precisely in order to puncture its pretensions. Plaster busts sit in his studio across from nudes with mischievously scrambled body parts. A classical head with both eyes seen frontally but situated on a profile isn't really a classical head. The world in which he wandered was Dionysian, prowled by satyrs and Minotaurs—the ominous bestiary that modernist idealism never managed to expel. Picasso recognized in Rembrandt an ancestor of his own dangerous visual intelligence, which could move freely between the aesthetic convenience of the nude and the messier, sexier reality of the naked model: etched images of half-dressed women warming themselves by the stove. Nothing like that stripping truth would happen again until Manet and Degas.

Picasso and Matisse thought there was what they called a "chain" that connected their understanding of modernism with certain older masters—Velázquez and Goya as well as Rembrandt—who had begun the work of having art ask awkward questions about its own conventions: in this case, the comfortable piety of the nude. That makes Rembrandt's half-naked women (except in the modesty of their undress) the true conceptual ancestors of Picasso's "Demoiselles d'Avignon," two hundred and fifty years later. So the inspirational Rembrandt might be at least as important as the historical Rembrandt.

If art's highest purpose was to make visible what Sir Joshua Reynolds called "invariable" ideas of beauty, Rembrandt was compromised by his earthiness. If art's fulfillment came from the harmonious deployment of light and shade, Rembrandt would be found wanting for the jarring extravagance of his chiaroscuro and his contempt for subtle modulations of tone. If self-effacing absorption within the purity of art's realm was what you were after, Rembrandt's shameless appeal to the beholder, his addiction to the human theatre (often starring himself), the aggressive marks of his own heavy hand were repellently self-indulgent. Reynolds, who was both an admirer and a collector (and who painted a portrait of himself as a young man in an obviously Rembrandtian manner), nonetheless found "The Night Watch"—that explosive, centrifugal discharge of civic energy, at once brilliantly controlled and feverishly liberated—a dismaying, incoherent chaos. He also thought it "extraordinary that Rembrandt should have taken so much pains" on the "Susanna" in the Mauritshuis in The Hague "and have made at last so very ugly and ill-favoured a figure."

But Reynolds was prepared to forgive Rembrandt his excesses and his wanton disregard for proper finish, because, like many eighteenth-century writers, he considered him a master colorist. When the Romantics acclaimed Rembrandt as an unsurpassed dramatist of light and color, they turned on its head the assertion that his naturalism belonged to a lesser order of vision than classical idealism. Their message was: Do not confuse common subjects with prosaic painting; Rembrandt proves the opposite—that the divine lives within the husk of mortal things.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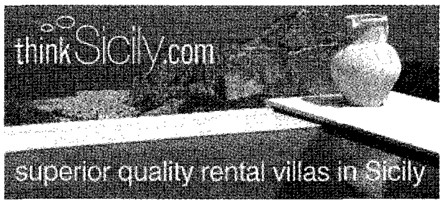

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The critic William Hazlitt, for whom Rembrandt was indisputably "a man of genius," described him in 1817 as "the least commonplace in his grossness of all men" and "the least fastidious of the imitators of nature," for "he took any object, he cared not what, how mean soever in form, colour and expression, and from the light and shade which he threw upon it, it came out gorgeous from his hands." Truth to nature, which for Hazlitt was "the soul of art," was, therefore, the gateway to poetic vision, not the plodding transcription of matter.

Turner was even more emphatic. Rembrandt, he said in an 1811 lecture to the students at the Royal Academy, threw over common subjects a "veil of matchless colour" so that "the Eye dwells so completely enthrall'd [that it] thinks it a sacrilege to pierce the mystic shell of colour in search of form." In other words, forget about traditional drawing and composition. It was as a painter who modelled with light that Rembrandt had done what the critics had declared impossible—revealing, without the clutter of symbolism, the inner mysteries of outward things, including the human form and face. He was the perfect painter precisely because he conveyed both surface and interior, flesh and spirit, body and mind. While Rembrandt's earliest biographers had supposed him to be the illiterate friend of beggars and boors (and Saskia, the burgomaster's daughter, a simple peasant girl), the nineteenth-century writers thought him a profound thinker, *Denker und Dichter*.

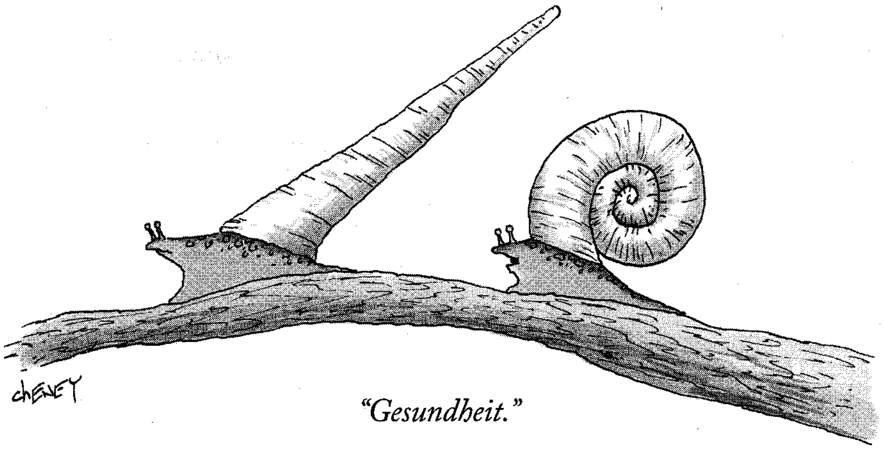
They had a point. Rembrandt was, in essence, a conceptual artist, who manifested his ideas not through classical emulation and high finish but through a sketchy roughness that preserved the lightning strike of what Delacroix called the *première pensée*. It was that direct hit of the imagining mind that distinguished true art, registering the flux of life, its contingent, temporal quality, the buddings and sheddings that gave human existence its majestic poignancy. Paradoxically, slick finish lied about nature and humanity. A broken surface, made with slashes and stabs and unconcerned to cover every corner of the canvas, better caught the emotive reality of lived life, an unpredictable affair, sometimes reticently withdrawn, sometimes so exuberantly full that it could never be contained within the hard-edged line. That was why not just van Gogh—a besotted idolater of Rembrandt—but a whole succession of practitioners of the expressively loaded brush, from Chaim Soutine to Frank Auerbach, have looked back to Rembrandt as having struck the first great blow to rid art of the callow equation between optical appearance and lived experience.

It was those high-minded connoisseurs the brothers Goncourt who, in 1861, spelled out the relationship between Rembrandt's athletic treatment of the paint surface and the expression of human vitality: "Never has the human form, living and breathing and beating in the light, been conveyed by the brush as by his." In Rembrandt's work, "flesh is painted, heads are drawn and modelled as if they emerged physically from the canvas, through a kind of tattoo of colours, a melted mosaic, a moving swarm of dabs which seems like . . . the palpitation of skin in sunlight."

The transference of that vitality effect from the geometric reproduction of illusory space according to the rules of Renaissance perspective to the vibrating paint surface itself was the beginning of modernism. And though the broken plumes of Titian's late brushwork and the dashes and blotches of Velázquez's painting were also unprecedented departures from high finish, Rembrandt's modernist devotees were right to hail him as their patriarch, however innocent he may have been of willed novelty. If Picasso recruited Velázquez and Manet to the modernist ancestry, how could he not see Rembrandt as the great inaugurator? All art, to some extent, attempts to stand against the transient nature of human experience by supplying an alternative vitality. But often the laborious attempt at "lifelikeness" risks ending up duplicating deadness. Rembrandt went the opposite way, achieving unprecedented liveliness by marking his portraits with the spoiling work of time, vitality achieved through the candid acceptance of mortality. That way, the mod-

erns correctly saw, he commanded a peerless ability to register fleshly human presence.

For instance, Rembrandt knew the ostensible truth of local color to be less important than getting its changing tones as it passed through variations of light and shade; that way, color itself became organic. Compositions like "The Night Watch," he gambled, would come alive not through an accumulation of posed portraits but through their atmospheric integration into an irregularly lit drama. The nineteenth-century painter Eugène Fromentin could not have been more mistaken when he wrote, "The country, the place, the moment, the subject, the men, the objects have disappeared in the stormy phantasmagoria of his palette." It was precisely because, in defiance of any precedent, Rembrandt whipped up that storm that the Amsterdam harquebusiers march from "The Night Watch" toward us, from their time to ours, with undiminished élan.



"Gesundheit."

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In the nineteen-sixties, after a thirty-year absence, Rembrandt came calling again, as Cohen points out, entering Picasso's increasingly morbid meditations on his own place in the pantheon. Picasso had undergone surgery for (depending on your sources) either his prostate or his bowel, but, in any case, a procedure that he thought had made him impotent. It's a commonplace that the artist who liked to masquerade as bull or Minotaur equated sexual and creative potency. (Indeed, one of the Vollard prints depicts a blind Minotaur in exactly the same attitude as the blind Tobit groping across a room in Rembrandt's etching.) If Picasso had made a variation of Rembrandt's "Bathsheba" (in the Louvre) back in the thirties, he might have incorporated himself into the painter's-eye view, which is also King David's as he spies on the perfect nude's ablutions, watching her read his summons to the royal presence and bed. But in his post-op satirical mood Picasso gave Bathsheba the features of his wife, Jacqueline, while making himself, grotesquely, the grinning maidservant washing her mistress's feet in preparation for the royal rape.

Depicting himself as a dwarfish voyeur unmanned by the proximity of imperious nudes, Picasso had even greater need of his fantasy Rembrandt, the artist enacting his virility with his brush. Rembrandt's startling portrait of himself as the Prodigal Son, unsubtly hoisting aloft a long, cylindrical goblet of wine, while Saskia, in the guise of a plump tavern whore, perches on his lap, became in Picasso's etched version a piece of ornamental pornography. His Saskia wears high heels, tart's lipstick, and a lurid grin, and, thanks to the Cubist convention of simultaneous front and rear depiction, can flash all her graphically detailed pudenda.

Picasso had become the emasculated onlooker in a perversely imagined Rembrandtian theatre of the senses; others would have to do his strutting and rutting for him. First, improbably, was the central figure in "The Night Watch," the well-named, for Picasso's purposes, Captain Frans Banning Cocq. Sometimes Picasso would project a slide of the painting on his studio wall, and from the uproar of that scene Captain Banning Cocq would stride into his drawings, paintings, and prints as the Musketeer, gripping his officer's cane, especially when confronted by a mighty nude. In one strangely beautiful aquatint, the Musketeer marches, hand on cane, not across an Amsterdam bridge but toward another stockinged woman offering herself, thighs splayed, from within a curtained bed.

Picasso's recruitment of Rembrandt as the sponsor for his own immortalization culminated, three years before his death, in a sacrilegious borrowing from Rembrandt's most theatrical etching, "Ecce Homo," Pilate's display of Christ before the people. In the Rembrandt etching, the Saviour is brought out as if for a curtain call, hands bound, on a high stage; spectators look out from lead-paned windows, an ill-assorted crowd (in the first five states of the etching) jostling below. Picasso borrowed the proscenium stage show but replaced the mocked Jesus with himself, turbaned, but pathetically reduced in stature: the impotent potentate. Gathered around him, onstage, in the stalls, peering down from the gods, is the teeming cast of characters who have populated his life and work: nudes on and off horses; incarnations of himself as diapered baby-Pablo; Pierrot-Pablo; and, in imitation of the Musketeer, spear-bearing Pablo. In place of the jeering crowd calling for the crucifixion of Jesus there is, predictably, his seraglio, etched in as many styles as he had had lovers and wives.

Self-mockery (just about) saves this "Theatre of Picasso," as he called it, from egomania. Picasso probably knew of Rembrandt's disturbing final self-portrait, in which he posed as the Greek artist Zeuxis dying of a fit of bilious cackles as he laughed at the old woman whose portrait he was painting. Among the spectators smiling down at Picasso's final act are the bulb-nosed faces of the Rembrandt-Picasso the painter fantasized he had become.

Rembrandt had the life force in his hands, right to the end. That's why Picasso adamantly refused to think of him—or his other mentor-masters—as belonging to "the past." "To me there is no past or future in art," he said in the early nineteen-twenties. "The art of the great painters who lived in other times is not an art of the past; perhaps it is more alive today than it ever was." Timelessness is not always an empty cliché; sometimes, as the ninety-year-old Picasso knew when he reached toward Rembrandt as a tonic against extinction, it is full of sustaining truth. ♦

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SHOUTS & MURMURS

THE WISDOM OF CHILDREN

BY SIMON RICH

I. A Conversation at the Grownup Table, as Imagined at the Kids' Table

Mom: Pass the wine, please. I want to become crazy.

Dad: O.K.

Grandmother: Did you see the politics? It made me angry.

Dad: Me, too. When it was over, I had sex.

Uncle: I'm having sex right now.

Dad: We all are.

Mom: Let's talk about which kid I like the best.

Dad: (*laughing*) You know, but you won't tell.

Mom: If they ask me again, I might tell.

Friend from Work: Hey, guess what! My voice is pretty loud!

Dad: (*laughing*) There are actual monsters in the world, but when my kids ask I pretend like there aren't.

Mom: I'm angry! I'm angry all of a sudden!

Dad: I'm angry, too! We're angry at each other!

Mom: Now everything is fine.

Dad: We just saw the PG-13 movie. It was so good.

Mom: There was a big sex.

Friend from Work: I am the loudest! I am the loudest!

(*Everybody laughs.*)

Mom: I had a lot of wine, and now I'm crazy!

Grandfather: Hey, do you guys know what God looks like?

All: Yes.

Grandfather: Don't tell the kids.

II. A Day at UNICEF Headquarters, as I Imagined It in Third Grade

(*UNICEF sits on a throne. He is wearing a cape and holding a sceptre. A servant enters, on his knees.*)

UNICEF: Halloween is fast approaching! Have the third graders been given their little orange boxes?

Servant: Yes, your majesty!

UNICEF: Perfect. Did you tell them what the money was for?

Servant: No, sir, of course not! We just gave them the boxes and told them to collect for UNICEF. We said it was for "a good cause," but we didn't get any more specific than that.

UNICEF: Ha ha ha! Those fools! Soon I will have all the money in the world. For I am UNICEF, *evil king of Halloween!*

Servant: Sir . . . don't you think you've stolen enough from the children? Maybe you should let them keep the money this year.

UNICEF: Never! The children shall toil forever to serve my greed!

(*He tears open a little orange box full of coins and rubs them all over his fat stomach.*)

UNICEF: Yes! Oh, yes!

Servant: Wait! Your majesty! Look at this! Our records indicate that there's a kid out there—Simon—who's planning to *keep* his UNICEF money this year.

UNICEF: What?! But what about my evil plans? I was going to give that money to the Russians so they could build a bomb!

Servant: (*aside*) I guess there's still one hero left in this world.

UNICEF: No!

(*He runs out of the castle, sobbing.*)

Servant: Thank God Simon is keeping his UNICEF money.

Second Servant: Yes, it's good that he's keeping the money.

Third Servant: I agree. Simon is doing a good thing by keeping the money from the UNICEF box.

Servant: Then we're all in agreement. Simon should keep the money.

III. How College Kids Imagine the United States Government

THE PRESENT DAY

—Did you hear the news, Mr. President? The students at the University of Pittsfield are walking out of their classes, in protest over the war.

—(*spits out coffee*) Wha— What did you say?

—Apparently, students are standing up in the middle of lectures and walking right out of the building.

—But students *love* lectures. If they're willing to give those up, they must really be serious about this peace thing! How did you hear about this protest?

—The White House hears about every protest, no matter how small.

—Oh, right, I remember.

—You haven't heard the half of it, Mr. President. The leader of the group says that if you don't stop the war today they're going to . . . to . . . I'm sorry, I can't say it out loud. It's just too terrifying.

—Say it, damn it! I'm the President!

—All right! If you don't stop the war . . . they're going to stop going to school *for the remainder of the week.*

—Send the troops home.

—But, Mr. President! Shouldn't we talk about this?

—*Send the troops home.*

THE NINETEEN-SIXTIES

—Mr. President! Did you hear about Woodstock?

—Woo— Woodstock? What in God's name is that?

—Apparently, young people hate the war so much they're willing to participate in a musical sex festival as a protest against it.

—Oh, my God. They must really be serious about this whole thing.

—That's not all. Some of them are threatening to join communes: places where they make their own clothing . . . and beat on drums.

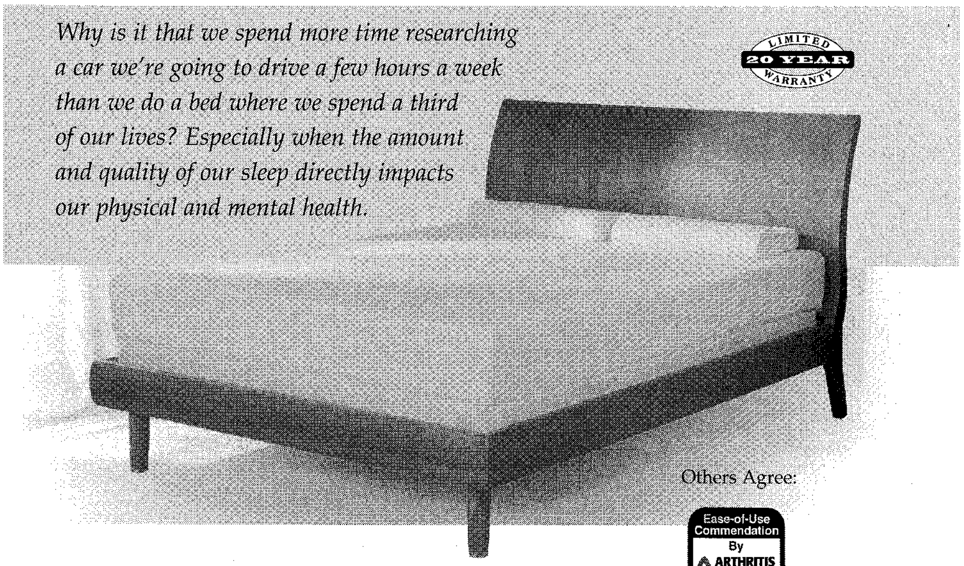
—Stop the war.

—But, Mr. President!

—Stop all American wars!

—(*sighs*) Very well, sir. I'll go tell the generals.

—Wow. It's a good thing those kids decided to go hear music. ♦



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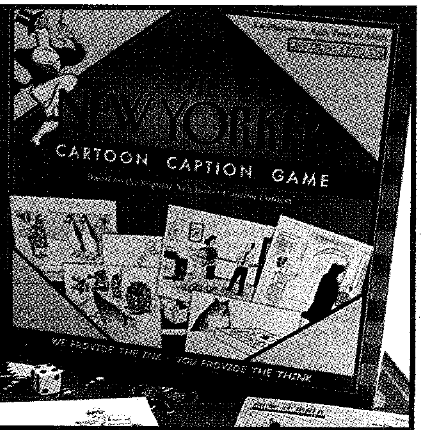

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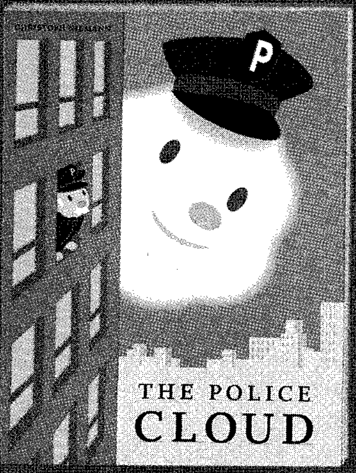

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OUR LOCAL CORRESPONDENTS

ANYTHING PINK ROCKS

A job in punk heaven.

BY ALEC WILKINSON

Not long ago, a woman from Brooklyn named Shavonne wanted a catsuit to wear to a costume party. She went to Trash and Vaudeville, a clothing store in the East Village, and spoke to Jimmy Webb, a salesman. "I don't have catsuits," Webb told her. "No one's the same across the shoulders and chest," he said, tracing the wings of her collarbone with his finger. "Catsuits have to fit perfectly, and they're expensive." Webb is also the store's buyer. "If I buy six," he said, "I can only sell one." Shavonne was disappointed. "Here's what you do," Webb told her. "You go to Capezio, on Broadway, and buy a unitard. You know what a unitard is?" She shook her head. "A full-body leotard," Webb said. "They stretch to fit. You'll look great." She thanked him and left.

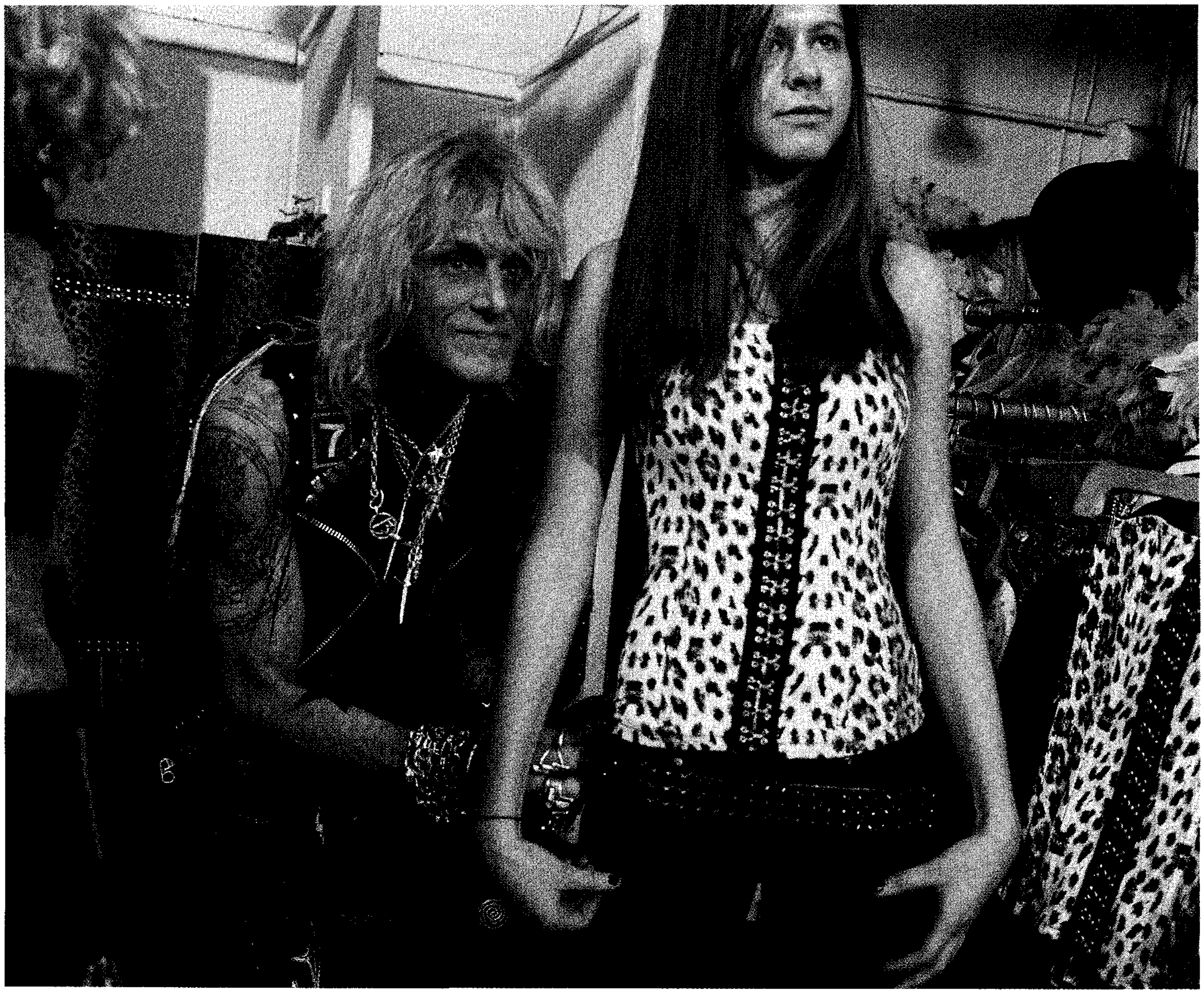
"Did you know I went to hairdressing school?" Webb asked me. I said I didn't. "I'm a beauty-school dropout, three times," he said. "Really, I'm more the kind of person to have my hair dressed than to dress other people's. They told me I was inappropriately attired. I caused too much of a stir."

I asked how.

"Wearing a unitard," he said. "It was a leftover one year from when I was a quaalude on Halloween. A Rorer 714, the original quaalude. I was bone-thin back then, twenty pounds lighter than now. I got a solid-white unitard. I wore solid white, cheap, Thirty-fourth Street, high-heeled boots, and I had a little Puerto Rican woman bleach my hair with old-school wig peroxide. I must have looked like a Q-tip, but in a good way. I wrote 'Rorer 714' on the front. Years later, when people are looking for catsuits that are expensive and don't fit, I know where a unitard is."

Adolescents, college kids, musicians, hobbyists, and aspirants both timid and bold regard Webb as an authority on matters of dress—especially rock-and-roll style, especially high-punk-rock style, which he epitomizes. He has helped assemble wardrobes for MTV, *Rolling Stone,* and *Vogue.* Jenni Lee, a stylist specializing in editorial work and CD covers, says that she consults Webb in order to dress "rocker bands, metal bands, rockabilly guys, even indie bands." She says that she also admires him because "he does daring things in dressing women." For Josh Madden, another stylist, Webb is "the spirit of everything that rocks." Madden values Webb's pragmatic eye. "Stylists think you have to pull a lot of stuff for a shoot," he says. "Jimmy tells you, 'Don't worry, just get the right thing.' It works because he's authentic. He's at the heart of where this stuff's coming from. He's been around punk rock and music and New York City for a long time, and he's around kids, too, so he knows. Where he's coming from, think about New York in, like, 1981, with Madonna, Andy Warhol, Basquiat, the Ramones, Lou Reed, every different kind of thing going on. Jimmy's one of the last pieces we have left of it, in my opinion."

Webb is forty-nine. He is small and still so lean that he looks as if he were made from wires and cables. He has shaggy, dyed-blond hair, a narrow, asymmetrical face, thin lips, a jut chin, and slitty blue eyes. Tattoos climb his arms like vines. On his wrists he wears stacks of heavy silver bracelets that get cold in the winter. Around his neck hangs a silver heart surrounded by thorns. People often stare at him on the street. Some of them appear to be trying to place him as a cultural figure. Women tend to appreciate his flamboyance. Young men typically avoid looking at him, or, as they pass, cut their eyes toward him. They seem unsettled by his appearance, as if his audacity were a rebuke to their reserve. Webb has a signature outfit—jeans, a T-shirt, a leather vest, and in winter a leather jacket with a hood trimmed in skunk—and he likes it so tight that it is as if he were being swaddled. Except for the



Jimmy Webb fitting a customer. "It's not rock and roll if your pants don't hurt," he says. Photograph by Gail Albert Halaban.

T-shirts, which usually say "Trash and Vaudeville" on the chest but sometimes have an image of Iggy Pop, Webb's wardrobe is bespoke. His jeans and vests and jacket are made by a woman in Los Angeles named Agatha Blois.

A pair of Blois's jeans costs between fifteen hundred and four thousand dollars, depending on how complicated they are and whether they are made from leather or fabric. Her typical customer is a movie star or a rock star or a famous designer—Karl Lagerfeld appears often in photographs wearing them. Webb has about fifteen pairs, half made from leather and half made from fabric. They are his signal extravagance. His instructions to Blois tend to be oblique. Once, he sent her a photograph from a fashion magazine of Iggy Pop naked and wrote, "I want a pair of pants just like that." Webb loves "X"s and lightning bolts, animal prints, and anything pink, Blois says—pink and black being the trademark colors of punk rock. Most pairs she makes for him take a week of work. They have a lot of metal on them, and they have eyes up the outsides of the legs, so they can be tightened like corsets. They're stitched as carefully as sails.

Blois keeps a pattern for Webb, but not all fabrics perform alike. "His hip bones need to ache," Blois says of the period when Webb is breaking in a new pair. ("It's not rock and roll if your pants don't hurt," he says.) If they don't, he will return the pants to Blois for alterations, saying, "These are gigantic." The leather jacket she made for him fit so tightly that for a month, while it was adjusting to him, the jacket bruised his forearms and elbows and made his shoulders hurt. Blois cherishes their collaboration. "Some of the greatest things I ever made, I made only because of Jimmy," she says. "I told him once, 'I don't know if I could even be me if I didn't have you.' The more outlandish the clothes that I make for him are, the more he looks like himself."

Webb has been a salesman at Trash and Vaudeville for seven years. He regards the store as a shrine—"rock-and-roll heaven," he calls it. In 1999, he wrote a letter to the owner, Ray Goodman, asking for a job. He had a clerk at a copy shop type the letter for him, because he doesn't use a computer. At his interview, he told Goodman that "when someone comes in for a shirt I know how to sell him socks and pants and a belt to go with it." He was hired as the store's lowest-paid employee, and within a year he had become the highest paid. According to Goodman, Webb embodies the store's philosophy of selling. "Jimmy's out to make a sale, but in a nice way," Goodman says. "If you leave the store and your friends think you look terrible, they're not going to ask you where you got your clothes. And if your friends think you look terrible you're not coming back."

Webb works seven days a week, and almost never takes vacations. "I tried to go to Cape Cod," he told me. "On the bus. Sandpipers rock, but how long can I look at a sandpiper? I was back in two and a half days. Counting travel time." On the sales floor, being "the dream-maker," helping shy adolescents find "the rock star within," he is happier than he is anywhere. "I don't feel sure of many things in life, but I'm sure of two: I'll be in New York forever, and I'm never leaving Trash and Vaudeville. I want to have them stuff me like—what's it called?—taxidermy, and put me in a corner. They can rig it so someone can pull a string and I'll say, 'You rock,' or 'Tighter, tighter, those pants need to be tighter'—the things I say every day."

Trash and Vaudeville occupies two long, narrow floors in a brownstone at 4 St. Marks Place. One floor is below the street and one is above—a metal staircase on the sidewalk connects them. Goodman, who grew up in Jersey City, "a couple of stops away on the PATH train," opened the store in 1975. Its aesthetic, which depends mainly on its own brand of tight black jeans—the kind worn by the Ramones, who signed a poster hanging on a wall—has been consistent to the point of being static. "We fill a demand and a void," Goodman says. The store also has its own clothing line, Tripp, which Goodman's wife, Daang, designs. Twice a year, Webb and Goodman travel to Las Vegas to buy additional inventory at a trade show. Webb's bracelets, which do not easily come off, and his pants get him special attention at the airport. Goodman says that he always looks for a separate security line from the one that Webb is using.

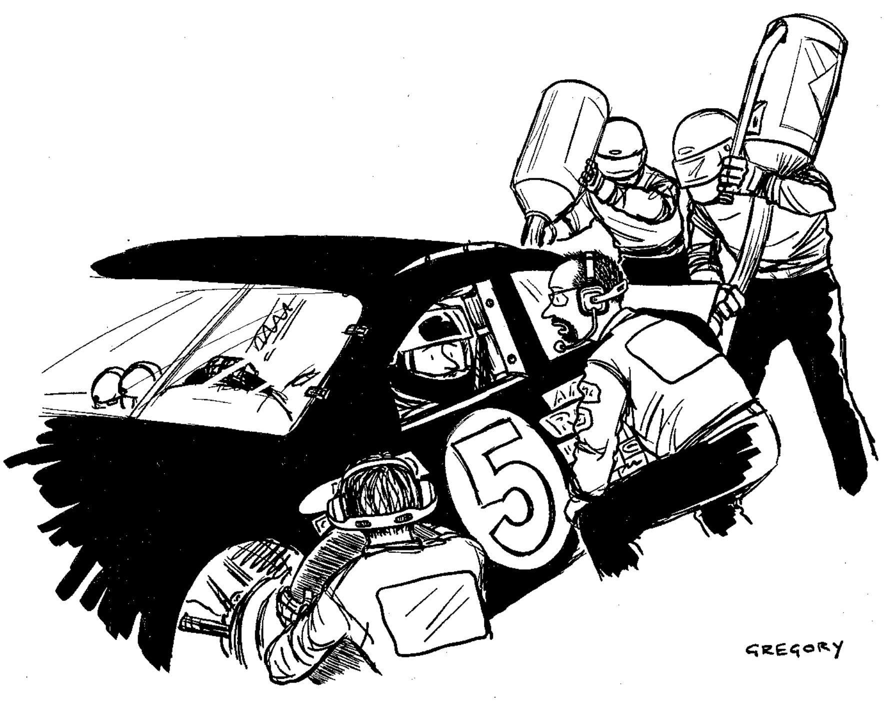
One afternoon, when I arrived at the store, Webb was standing at the top of the steps, as if on the prow of a ship. Beside him was a girl with light-brown skin. Her hair was drawn back, her face was small and round, and her features were delicate and finely drawn. She was wearing tight jeans and a T-shirt that said "Bullshit." Webb introduced us, and she told me, "Jimmy's amazing. He's one of the kindest people I've ever met. He's so warm."

"I've watched her grow up," Webb said.

I took her to be in her early twenties, but when I asked what she did she said, "I go to high school," and named a progressive school on the Upper East Side.

"If you look at her face," Webb said, "you can really see her mother." Then he mentioned the name of an actress. Her last name was her father's, a rock star.

The girl hugged Webb and left, and he went into the store. Upstairs, the back room is slightly wider than the front. There are racks of clothes and two aisles like paths. The far end of the store smells like leather, from the displays of motorcycle jackets. Close by the jackets are five stalls that serve as changing rooms. Each door is decorated. From left to right as you face them, there is a bondage door with black leather and chains; one with two tight-waisted dresses in a Moulin Rouge style; a stars-and-stripes door in red and black leather with the word "Trash" embedded in silver; a leopard-print door with leather and chains; and one with red zebra stripes fashioned into flames.



"Is this a bad time to talk about global warming?"

A dark-haired girl was standing in front of a wide, full-length mirror by the stalls. She had on a T-shirt that said "Sweet Ride," and a pair of tight bluejeans. She was twisting around to see how her backside looked. "Do they squish my butt a little?" she asked Webb.

"You can't get bigger, or you'll have diaper butt," he said. "You know, where it sags in the back?"

A slight Asian boy wearing gray jeans and a gray T-shirt stepped out of a stall. He looked like a pair of tweezers. "I want lower and tighter," he told Webb.

Webb found smaller jeans for him, and the boy went back into the stall. "It's always lower and tighter," Webb said. "Nothing else." When the boy decided the jeans were still too large, Webb found even smaller ones. Each time that the boy emerged from the stall, he seemed to be shrinking.

Sweet Ride appeared in black jeans. While she judged her image, the Asian boy arrived and stood beside her. He studied himself ruthlessly. Sweet Ride nodded, a kind of approval. She said, "Let me see your ass."

Without taking his eyes from his form, the boy said disdainfully, "I don't have an ass."

From the front of the store, a saleswoman named Heather, who is tall and blond and festooned with tattoos, called Webb, and when he arrived she handed him the telephone. He listened for a moment. "I'm Jimmy," he said. "You just come up, I'll rock you out." Then he hung up, and returned to the back of the store. For a girl with braces who was shopping with her father, he knelt to adjust the hem on her jeans. "I'm always down, folding and tucking," he said. "I'm like an old Italian tailor, always in the back on my knees."

When Webb stood up, there were two teen-age girls beside him modelling jeans in the mirror. The pants fit them like bark. "They conform over time," Webb told them. "You'll know if someone stole your pants. You'll see them and you'll say, 'Those are my knees.'"

Webb then began finding pants for two young Japanese women. One would try on the pants, then open the stall door slightly, so that only the other could see. Then they would collapse into giggling.

By now, evening had fallen. The store grew quiet. Webb went and stood by the front door. A young man came in with a friend and asked to have his photograph taken with Webb. "My father will remember the day," he said, meaning the punk period. He gave his camera to his friend and put his arm around Webb. "No flash," Webb said, "because it's so bright in here. I'll look eight hundred years old. Let's go outside."

They walked out on the landing, and in the darkness there was briefly a pulse of white.

Trash and Vaudeville has acquainted Webb with scores of young moderns. The first account of his past that I heard was from one of them, Owen Kline, who is fifteen. Kline is tall and handsome, with big feet, a round face, and dark eyes. He lives with his parents uptown and hopes to be a director. "I've heard the entire Jimmy story a couple of times," he told me one day in the store. "I know everything about him—he's very open about his personal life. What would you like to know?"

I asked if he knew where Webb had grown up.

Kline shrugged. "Who knows where—Virginia or Vermont, or something like that," he said. "He was living in a suburb, he went to high school, then community college, then ran away from home—interesting move. Years ago, there were so many more things to rebel against. It's like Marlon Brando in 'The Wild One,' where they ask him, 'What do you rebel against?' and he says, 'What have you got?' You've seen that?"

I said I hadn't.

"Well, rebellion's turned more into a style and a fad," he said patiently. "It's pseudo. It's also got real poserish. Jimmy's authentic, though. He's so alive, very funny, very eccentric. Anyway, so he met, I don't know, along the way some maybe famous guy who was also running away, and came to New York City, I think in the seventies, worked in bars and got really into parties and drugs, went dancing at Studio 54, and then he got older, cleaned up, and became Jimmy from Trash and Vaudeville."

Actually, Webb grew up in Wynantskill, New York, near Troy. His father owned a two-pump gas station that was attached to the family's house, and raced stock cars on weekends at the Lebanon Valley Speedway. His mother, Nancy, dressed Jimmy and his two younger brothers identically to take them to the speedway.

Nancy loved dancing. "I always had to dance with my girlfriends, and I swore that when I got married my boys were going to learn to dance," she told me. At seven, Webb began taking lessons from a great-aunt, and he kept them up through high school. "He was very good at tap dancing," his mother said. "That was his specialty, but he also did some ballet."

In addition, Webb attended, as a teen-ager, a cake-decorating class. "I don't know where that came from," his mother said, "but all of sudden he asked me if he could go. He was the only male kid in his class, and the youngest person, and the women of all ages—they were teens, married women, middle aged—they had a ball with him."

Webb graduated from high school in three years. He was not a gifted student, he says; he merely wanted to get out of Wynantskill. "I think the other kids teased him a lot," his mother told me. "Dancing was for girls, even though Fred Astaire was a star, but not around here, around Troy." At sixteen, Webb enrolled in a community college in Connecticut. He hadn't been there long before he decided to hitchhike with friends to Florida, where he met two men from New York who were on vacation, and when they went back to the city they bought a plane ticket for him to go with them. They got him a job "delivering cocktails in a gay bar, and I could see where that would lead, and I wanted more," Webb says. "I wanted to dance and live, so I took off into the streets by myself with all the other runaway boys. No fear."

In the bar, Webb had met a Spanish hairdresser named Jamie who persuaded him to dye his brown hair blond. "We

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started with a streak when I was sixteen," Webb says, "and by seventeen I was totally blond. In no time at all we were using Ultra White Minx, Silent Snow—colors from the fifties. Then platinum everywhere. Every two weeks, so no roots. My scalp burned to the max."

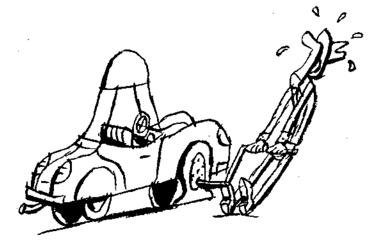
Dancing at night clubs was Webb's favorite pastime. He liked Studio 54, with its androgyny and its excess, best of all. He would spend hours dressing to go there. In the years after the club closed, in 1986, there were times when Webb worked and had a place to live and times when he was homeless and drug-addicted. For a while, he slept in a box in Tompkins Square Park. "I got street in me bad," he says. Once, famished, he was thrown out of a grocery store for eating bread off the shelves. As he described this period to me, one day in the store, he was rueful and subdued. "If you had met me in those days, you would have met Two Dollar Jimmy," he said. "Not even Five Dollar Jimmy, let alone Million Dollar Jimmy."

Webb lives by himself in the East Twenties. "In a little cave," he says. "A basement with a lot of Jesus statues. I collect things from old churches. It's something about old Italian women and their faith." The apartment is dark, with pink walls. The bed has a zebra-striped spread. There are a lot of pillows, some with skull-and-crossbone figures on them. On the floor is a pink-and-black rug with a skull and crossbones. The walls are hung with photographs of musicians, and framed Trash and Vaudeville T-shirts signed for Webb by famous customers. There are a number of photographs of Iggy Pop. There are strings of little musical notes and feather boas hanging from the ceiling. Running along the baseboards are braids of Christmas lights. "I used to keep all the lights on, so I would have this little heaven on earth to come home to," Webb said, "but it cost three hundred dollars a month, so now I only do some. I had Con Ed come and do an investigation of why it was so expensive. They walked in and thought I was crazy." Most of the lights are pink, but some are purple. "You can buy pink all year round," he says, "but you can only buy purple at Halloween, so I keep a stock of them."

I met him one morning at the apartment in order to have breakfast in SoHo. He had been writing letters on pink stationery when I arrived, around nine. "I answer everyone who writes the store," he said. "I get a lot of thank-you notes from kids and their parents." (Excerpt from a parent's letter: "Jimmy is the brightest star in the sky. His love and passion for what he does always shine through.") "I figure if you take the time to write me, you deserve a reply. Besides, I'm up at six in the morning, like an old grandma, why not write for the store." He put his letters into a leather bag that Agatha Blois made for him, and then he stood in front of a full-length mirror. He put some music on. "I can't get dressed to go out without music," he said. "It doesn't happen." He took a gauzy scarf from a rack of them and wrapped it around his neck, then he put on his leather jacket. When everything was settled to his liking, he looked around the room and said, "What will start a fire?" He pointed at some lights by the baseboard beside the door and said, "These," and he got down on his knees and unplugged them. He picked up his bag and started toward the door, then stopped suddenly; the strings on his pants had caught on the leg of a table. "One thing about me is I get caught on everything," he said. "I'm always tangled."

We got into a taxi, and I asked to look at his bracelets. He extended one arm, then he frowned. "Mixed among all that silver, I want some gold now," he said. I said, "Really? I never liked the way gold and silver look together."

"Exactly," he said. "It's so wrong it works. How rock and roll is that? I want a big gold money sign, with diamonds on it, like a rapper but rude." He withdrew his arm. "I've always loved diamonds," he said, "but I really fell in love with them when I was with Agatha one time. We were in a juice bar in L.A., and she was wearing sweatpants and a little fifteen-hundred-dollar hooker top she'd made, and she had these diamonds on—she's just a simple girl covered in diamonds—and I caught a glimpse of her in the window, and she was sparkling."



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collected from roadside, culvert, and viaduct,
battlefield, threshing floor, basilica, abattoir,
stones loosened by tanks in the streets
of a city whose earliest map was drawn in ink on linen,
schoolyard stones in the hand of a corpse,
pebble from Apollinaire's *oui*,
stone of the mind within us
carried from one silence to another,
stone of cromlech and cairn, schist and shale, hornblende,
agate, marble, millstones, and ruins of choirs and shipyards,
chalk, marl, and mudstone from temples and tombs,
stone from the silvery grass near the scaffold,
stone from the tunnel lined with bones,
lava of the city's entombment,
chipped from lighthouse, cell wall, scriptorium,
paving stones from the hands of those who rose against the army,
stones where the bells had fallen, where the bridges were blown,
those that had flown through windows and weighted petitions,
feldspar, rose quartz, slate, blueschist, gneiss, and chert,
fragments of an abbey at dusk, sandstone toe
of a Buddha mortared at Bamiyan,
stone from the hill of three crosses and a crypt,
from a chimney where storks cried like human children,
stones newly fallen from stars, a stillness of stones, a heart,
altar and boundary stone, marker and vessel, first cast, lode, and hail,
bridge stones and others to pave and shut up with,
stone apple, stone basil, beech, berry, stone brake,
stone bramble, stone fern, lichen, liverwort, pippin, and root,
concretion of the body, as blind as cold as deaf,
all earth a quarry, all life a labor, stone-faced, stone-drunk
with hope that this assemblage, taken together, would become
a shrine or holy place, an ossuary, immovable and sacred,
like the stone that marked the path of the sun as it entered the human dawn.

—*Carolyn Forché*

I asked if he had any philosophies of style.

"You should never give away your secrets," he said.

I pressed him. He looked out the window.

"Anything pink rocks," he said finally. "Anything animal-print rocks. Anything skintight."

"That it?"

"A necklace has to hang just above the cleavage, on the bone between the shoulders, if the dress allows it. And you should never look at only one thing. The other day, I was looking at my sneakers, and I started looking harder and looking harder, and after about a block I had to go home and change them."

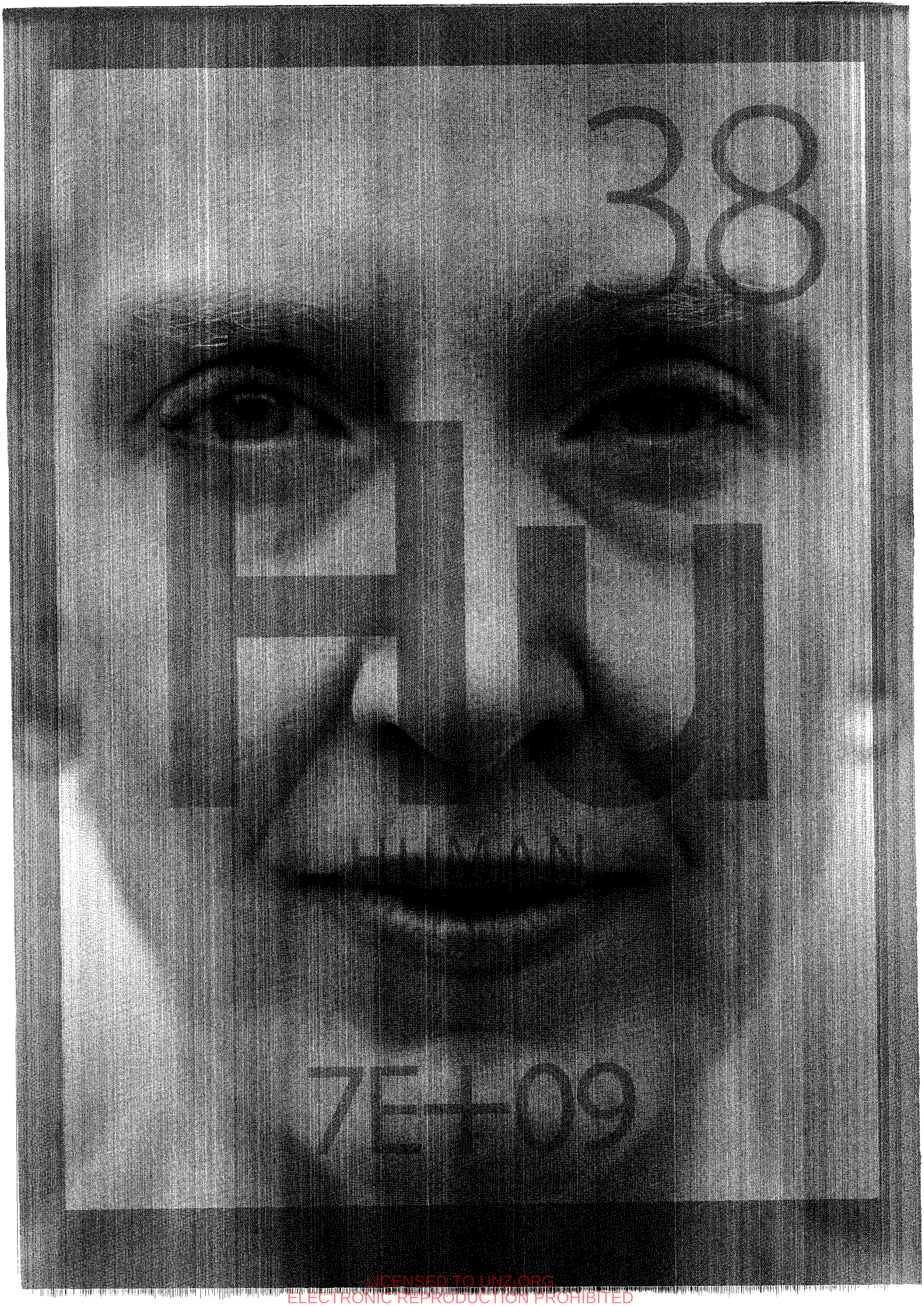
I asked how he knew when a dress or a pair of tight pants was right for someone.

"You see the lines," he said. "I can't draw, only stick figures—I learned that being a buyer—but following the line is where the art comes in." The cab stopped briefly at a light. "There's a place on a dress—when I'm zipping it up for someone, it's almost the middle of the back—where the dress comes together around her," he said. "You say, 'Do you feel that?' and when they say they do you know that dress will be wrapped and out the door. If it doesn't fit, they won't feel it."

As we got close to the restaurant, the traffic stalled, so we got out to walk. "Did you always dress lavishly?" I asked. "I've tried being plain," he said. "A few years before I worked at Trash and Vaudeville, I dyed my hair brown, I wore black pants and a white shirt, but every time I would surrender no money was made, and people still pointed and laughed. Dressing is all about the whole look. If one thing stands out, you're a beautiful coat walking down the street, or a pair of pants on the subway. With everything on, even if the elements are different from each other, it blends. You can't cross that line to Bozo, though. That's my new term, the Bozo line. You must never cross the Bozo line. I could look like Bozo right now, but instead I'm totally fabulous. I just happen to look fabulous with thousands of dollars of clothes and jewels and a twenty-dollar shirt."

As we walked, the strings hanging from Webb's pants whipped around his legs, making a slapping sound. His bracelets and the pants' metal fittings jingled; he sounded like a cop. When I mentioned it, he said, "I love that I make so much noise." In front of the restaurant, a woman was bending over a stroller to arrange the blanket for an infant. Beside her was a little boy. I don't know whether he heard Webb or saw him first, but he came suddenly to attention. His eyes grew large. He raised his chin as if he were watching something in the sky, and he wheeled completely in a circle to follow Webb's passing. "I'm sure to him I look like Bozo," Webb said. He smiled at the boy and gave a little wave. "Maybe not Bozo," he went on. "Maybe just like a big toy."

Sitting down, Webb took no notice of the people staring at him. The waiter brought us coffee. Webb told a long story that turned on his arriving in the city at sixteen, with his clothes in a pillowcase, and finding Trash and Vaudeville, seeing all the clothes he wished he could afford, and now being in the position of helping kids who reminded him of himself, of being "the dreammaker" to them, and the improbability of it, to his mind. The extent of what he considers to be his good fortune made him feel humbled, he said. The waiter put our food on the table. Webb looked suddenly quite melancholy. "I'm bewildered by life sometimes," he said softly, "but I try not to live in the bewilderment." ♦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MEET THE ELEMENT OF CHANGE. A world that includes the Human Element, along with hydrogen, oxygen and the other elements, is a very different world indeed. Suddenly, chemistry is put to work solving human problems. Bonds are formed between aspirations and commitments. And the energy released from reactions fuels a boundless spirit that will make the planet a safer, cleaner, more comfortable place for generations to come. A world that welcomes change is about to meet the element of change: the Human Element.

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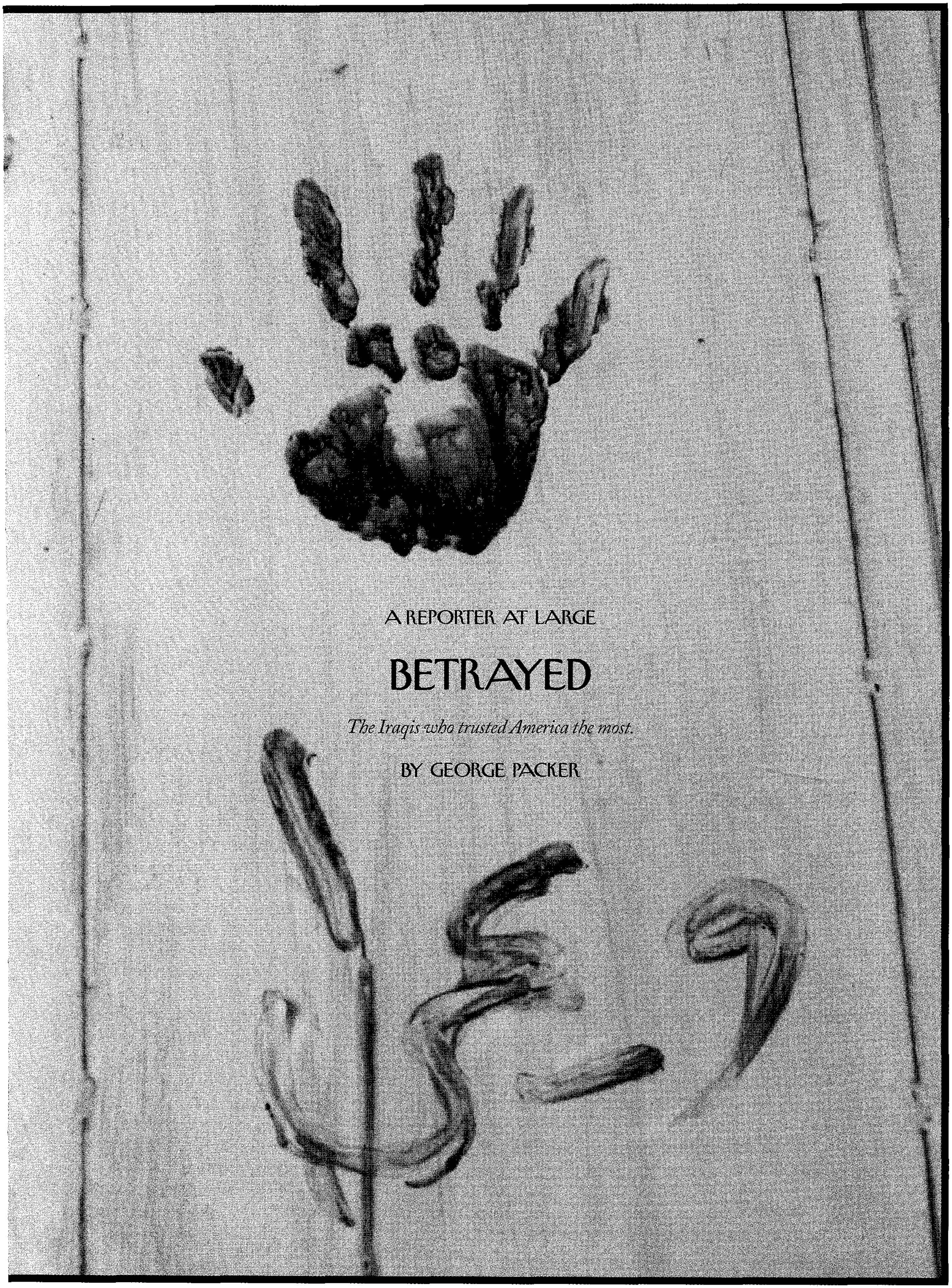
A REPORTER AT LARGE

BETRAYED

The Iraqis who trusted America the most.

BY GEORGE PACKER



POLARIS

On a cold, wet night in January, I met two young Iraqi men in the lobby of the Palestine Hotel, in central Baghdad. A few Arabic television studios had rooms on the upper floors of the building, but the hotel was otherwise vacant. In the lobby, a bucket collected drips of rainwater; at the gift shop, which was closed, a shelf displayed film, batteries, and sheathed daggers covered in dust. A sign from another era read, "We have great pleasure in announcing the opening of the Internet café 24 hour a day. At the business center on the first floor. The management." The management consisted of a desk clerk and a few men in black leather jackets slouched in armchairs and holding two-way radios.

The two Iraqis, Othman and Laith, had asked to meet me at the Palestine because it was the only place left in Baghdad where they were willing to be seen with an American. They lived in violent neighborhoods that were surrounded by militia checkpoints. Entering and leaving the Green Zone, the fortified heart of the American presence, had become too risky. But even the Palestine made them nervous. In October, 2005, a suicide bomber driving a cement mixer had triggered an explosion that nearly brought down the hotel's eighteen-story tower. An American tank unit that was guarding the hotel eventually pulled out, leaving security in the hands of Iraqi civilians. It would now be relatively easy for insurgents to get inside. The one comforting thought for Othman and Laith was that, four years into the war, the Palestine was no longer worth attacking.

The Iraqis and I went up to a room on the eighth floor. Othman smoked by the window while Laith sat on one of the twin beds. (The names of most of the Iraqis in this story have been changed for their protection.) Othman was a heavyset doctor, twenty-nine years old, with a gentle voice and an unflappable ironic manner. Laith, an engineer with rimless eyeglasses, was younger and taller, and given to bursts of enthusiasm and displeasure. Othman was Sunni, Laith was Shiite.

It had taken Othman three days to get to the hotel from his house, in western Baghdad. On the way, he was trapped for two nights at his sister's house, which was in an ethnically mixed neighborhood: gun battles had broken out between Sunni and Shiite militiamen. Othman watched the home of his sister's neighbor, a Sunni, burn to the ground. Shiite militiamen scrawled the words "Leave or else" on the doors of Sunni houses. Othman was able to leave the house only because his sister's husband—a Shiite, who was known to the local Shia militias—escorted him out. Othman took a taxi to the house of Laith's grandfather; from there, he and Laith went to the Palestine, where they enjoyed their first hot water in several weeks.

They had a strong friendship, based on a shared desire. Before the war, they had both longed for the arrival of the Americans, expecting them to change their lives. They had told each other that they would try to work with the foreigners. Othman and Laith were both secular, and despised the extremist militias on each side of Iraq's civil war, but the ethnic conflict had led them increasingly to quarrel, to the point that one of them—usually Laith—would refuse to speak to the other.

Laith began to describe these strains. "It started when the Americans came with Shia leaders and wanted to give the Shia leadership—"

"And kick out the Sunnis," Othman interrupted. "You admit this? You were not admitting it before."

"The Americans don't want to kick out the Sunnis," Laith said. "They want to give Shia the power because most Iraqis are Shia."

"And you believe the Sunnis did not want to participate, right?" Othman said. "The Americans didn't give them the chance to participate." He turned to me: "You know I'm not just saying this because I'm a Sunni—"

Laith rolled his eyes. "What*ever*."

"But I think the Shia made the Sunnis feel that they're against them."

"This is not the point, who started it," Laith said heatedly. "Everybody is getting killed, the Shia and the Sunnis." He paused. "But if we think who started it, I think the Sunnis started it!"

"I think the Shia," Othman repeated, with calm knowingness. He said to me, "When I feel that I'm pushing too much and he starts to become so angry, I pull the brake."

Laith had a job with an American organization, affiliated with the National Endowment for Democracy, that encouraged private enterprise in developing countries. Othman had worked with a German group called Architects for People in Need, and then as a translator for foreign journalists. These were coveted jobs, but over time they had become so dangerous that Othman and Laith could talk candidly about their lives with no one except each other.

"I trust him," Othman said of his friend. "We've shared our experiences with foreigners—the good and the bad. We don't have a secret life when we are together. But when we go out we have to lie."

Othman's cell phone rang: a friend was calling from Jordan. "I had a vision that you'll be killed by the end of the month," he told Othman. "Get out now, please. You can stay here with me. We'll live on pasta." Othman said something reassuring and hung up, but his phone kept ringing, the friend calling back; his vision had made him hysterical.

A string of bad events had given Othman the sense that time was running out for him in Iraq. In November, members of the Mahdi Army—the Shia militia commanded by the radical cleric Moqtada al-Sadr—rounded up Othman's older brother and several other Sunnis who worked in a shop in a mixed neighborhood. The Sunnis were taken to a local Shia mosque and shot. Othman's brother was only grazed in the head, but a Shiite soldier noticed that he was still alive and shot him in the eye. Somehow, he survived this, too. Othman found his brother and took him to a hospital for surgery. The hospital—like the entire Iraqi health system—was under the Mahdi Army's control, and Othman decided that his brother would be safer at their parents' house. The brother was now blind, deranged, and vengeful, making life unbearable for Othman's family. A few days later, Othman's elderly maternal aunts, who were Shia and lived in a majority-Sunni area, were told by Sunni

Bloody handprints in Najaf. Iraqi employees of the U.S. regularly receive death threats. Photograph by Max Becherer.

insurgents that they had three days to leave. Othman's father, a retired Sunni officer, went to their neighborhood and convinced the insurgents that his wife's sisters were, in fact, Sunnis. And then, one day in January, Othman's two teenage brothers, Muhammad and Salim, on whom he doted, failed to come home from school. Othman called the cell phone of Muhammad, who was fifteen. "Is this Muhammad?" he said.

A stranger's voice answered: "No, I'm not Muhammad."

"Where is Muhammad?"

"Muhammad is right here," the stranger said. "I'm looking at him now. We have both of them."

"Are you joking?"

"No, I'm not. Are you Sunni or Shia?"

Thinking of what had happened to his older brother, Othman lied: "We're Shia." The stranger told him to prove it. The boys had left their identity cards at home, for their own safety.

Othman's mother took the phone, sobbing and begging the kidnapper not to hurt her boys. "We're going to behead them," the kidnapper told her. "Choose where you want us to throw the bodies. Or do you prefer us to cut them to pieces for you? We enjoy cutting young boys to pieces." The man hung up.

After several more phone conversations, Othman realized his mistake: the kidnappers were Sunnis, with Al Qaeda. Shiites are not Muslims, the kidnappers told him—they deserve to be killed. Then they stopped answering the phone. Othman called a friend who belonged to a Sunni political party with ties to insurgents; over the course of the afternoon, the friend got the kidnappers back on the phone and convinced them that the boys were Sunnis. They were released with apologies, along with their money and their phones.

It was the worst day of Othman's life. He said he would never forget the sound of the stranger's voice.

Othman began a campaign of burning. He went into the yard or up on the roof of his parents' house with a jerrican of kerosene and set fire to papers, identity badges, books in English, photographs—anything that might incriminate him as an Iraqi who worked with foreigners. If Othman had to flee Iraq, he wanted to leave nothing behind that might harm him or his family. He couldn't bring himself to destroy a few items, though: his diaries, his weekly notes from the hospital where he had once worked. "I have this bad habit of keeping everything like memories," he said.

Most of the people Othman and Laith knew had left Iraq. House by house, Baghdad was being abandoned. Othman was considering his options: move his parents from their house (in an insurgent stronghold) to his sister's house (in the midst of civil war); move his parents and brothers to Syria (where there was no work) and live with his friend in Jordan (going crazy with boredom while watching his savings dwindle); go to London and ask for asylum (and probably be sent back); stay in Baghdad for six more months until he could begin a scholarship that he'd won, to study journalism in America (or get killed waiting). Beneath his calm good humor, Othman was paralyzed—he didn't want to leave Baghdad and his family, but staying had become impossible. Every day, he changed his mind.

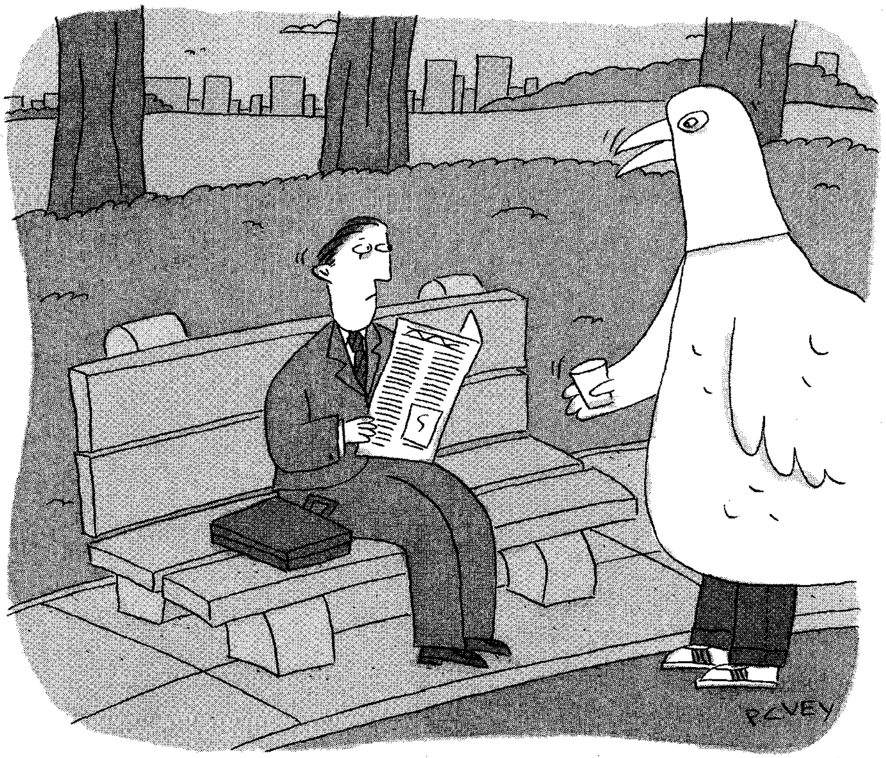
From the hotel window, Othman could see the palace domes of the Green Zone directly across the Tigris River. "It's sad," he told me. "With all the hopes that we had, and all the dreams, I was totally against the word 'invasion.' Wherever I go, I was defending the Americans and strongly saying, 'America was here to make a change.' Now I have my doubts."

Laith was more blunt: "Sometimes, I feel like we're standing in line for a ticket, waiting to die."

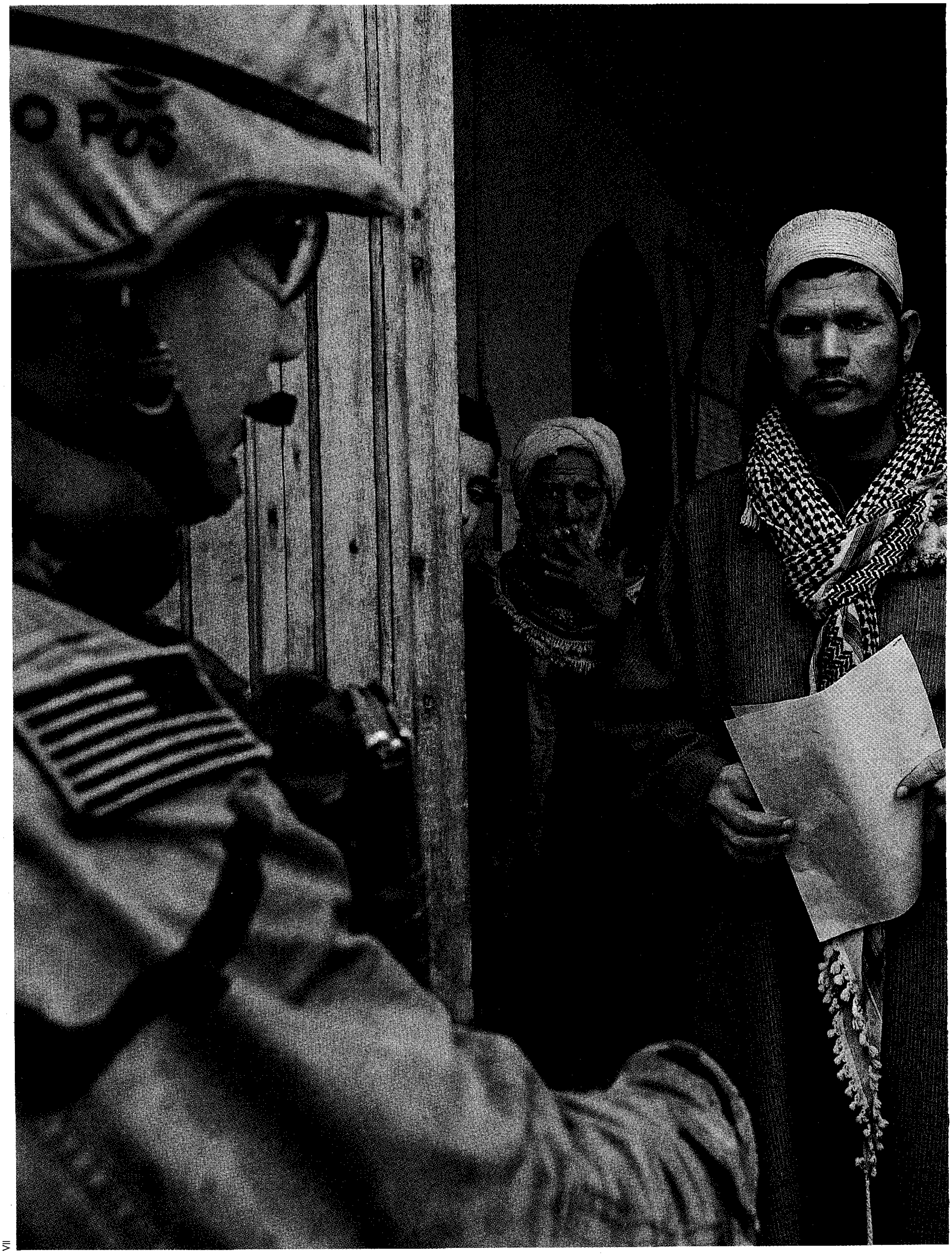
By the time Othman and Laith finished talking, it was almost ten o'clock. We went downstairs and found the hotel restaurant empty, with no light or heat. A waiter in a white shirt and black vest emerged out of the darkness to take our orders. We shivered for an hour until the food came.

There was an old woman at the cash register, with long, dyed-blond hair, a shapeless gown, and a macramé beret that kept falling off her head. I recognized her: she had been the cashier in 2003, when I first came to the Palestine. Her name was Taja, and she had worked at the hotel for twenty-five years. She had the smile of a mad hag.

I asked if there had been any other customers tonight. "My dear, no one," Taja said, in English. The sight of me seemed to jar loose a bundle of memo-



"Spare change for those unfortunate enough to have to walk around in a bird costume all day?"



VII

An Iraqi interpreter wears a mask to conceal his identity while he assists a soldier delivering an invitation to an Imam for a meeting with

an American colonel. Photograph by James Nachtwey.

ries. Her brother had gone to New Orleans in 1948 and forgotten all about her. There was music here in the old days, she said, and she sang a few lines from the Spaniels' "Goodnight, Sweetheart, Goodnight":

> Goodnight, sweetheart,
> Well it's time to go.
> I hate to leave you, but I really must say,
> Goodnight, sweetheart, goodnight.

When the Americans first came, Taja said, the hotel was full of customers, including marines. She took the exam to work as a translator three times, but kept failing, because the questions were so hard: "The spider is an insect or an animal?" "Water is a beverage or a food?" Who could answer such questions?

Taja smiled at us. "Now all finished," she said.

MY TIME WILL COME

Millions of Iraqis, spanning the country's religious and ethnic spectrum, welcomed the overthrow of Saddam Hussein. But the mostly young men and women who embraced America's project so enthusiastically that they were prepared to risk their lives for it may constitute Iraq's smallest minority. I came across them in every city: the young man in Mosul who loved Metallica and signed up to be a translator at a U.S. Army base; the DVD salesman in Najaf whose plans to study medicine were crushed by Baath Party favoritism, and who offered his services to the first American Humvee that entered his city. They had learned English from American movies and music, and from listening secretly to the BBC. Before the war, their only chance at a normal life was to flee the country—a nearly impossible feat. Their future in Saddam's Iraq was, as the Metallica fan in Mosul put it, "a one-way road leading to nothing." I thought of them as oddballs, like misunderstood high-school students whose isolation ends when they go off to college. In a similar way, the four years of the war created intense friendships, but they were forged through collective disappointment. The arc from hope to betrayal that traverses the Iraq war is nowhere more vivid than in the lives of these Iraqis. America's failure to understand, trust, and protect its closest friends in Iraq is a small drama that contains the larger history of defeat.

An interpreter named Firas—he in-

"*My wife! The good silver!*"

• •

sisted on using his real name—grew up in a middle-class Shia family in a prosperous Baghdad neighborhood. He is a big man in his mid-thirties with a shaved head, and his fierce, heavily ringed eyes provide a glimpse into the reserves of energy that lie beneath his phlegmatic surface. As a young man, Firas was shut out of a government job by his family's religious affiliation and by his lack of connections. He wasted his twenties in a series of petty occupations: selling cigarettes wholesale; dealing in spare parts; peddling books on Mutanabi Street, in old Baghdad. Books, more than anything, shaped Firas's passionately melancholy character. As a young man, he kept a credo on his wall in English and Arabic: "Be honest without the thought of Heaven or Hell." He was particularly impressed by "The Outsider," a 1956 philosophical work by the British existentialist Colin Wilson. "He wrote about the 'non-belonger,' " Firas explained. Firas felt like an exile in his own land, but, he recalled, "There was always this sound in the back of my head: the time will come, the change will come, *my* time will come. And when 2003 came, I couldn't believe how right I was."

Overnight, everything was new. Americans, whom he had seen only in movies, rolled through the streets. Men who had been silent all their lives cursed Saddam in front of their neighbors. The fall of the regime revealed traits that Iraqis had kept hidden: the greed that drove some to loot, the courage that made others stay on the job. Firas felt a lifelong depression lift. "The first thing I learned about myself was that I can make things happen," he said. "When you feel that you are an outcast, you don't really put an effort in anything. But after the war I would run here and there, I would *kill* myself, I would focus on one thing and not stop until I do it."

Thousands of Iraqis converged on the Palestine Hotel and, later, the Green Zone, in search of work with the Americans. In the chaos of the early days, a demonstrable ability to speak English—sometimes in a chance encounter with a street patrol—was enough to get you hired by an enterprising Marine captain. Firas began working in military intelligence. Almost all the Iraqis who were hired became interpreters, and American soldiers called them "terps," often giving them nicknames for convenience and, later, security (Firas became Phil). But what the Iraqis had to offer went well beyond linguistic ability: each of them was, potentially, a cultural adviser, an intelligence officer, a policy analyst. Firas told the soldiers not to point with their feet, not to ask to be introduced to someone's sister. Interpreters assumed that their perspective would be valuable to foreigners who knew little or nothing of Iraq.

Whenever I asked Iraqis what kind of government they had wanted to replace Saddam's regime, I got the same answer: they had never given it any thought. They just assumed that the Americans would bring the right people, and the country would blossom with freedom, prosperity, consumer goods, travel opportunities. In this, they mirrored the wishful thinking of American officials and neoconservative intellectuals who failed to plan for trouble. Almost no Iraqi claimed to have anticipated videos of beheadings, or Moqtada al-Sadr, or the terrifying question "Are you Sunni or Shia?" Least of all did they imagine that America would make so many mistakes, and persist in those mistakes to the point that even fair-minded Iraqis wondered about ulterior motives. In retrospect, the blind faith that many Iraqis displayed in themselves and in America seems naïve. But, now that Iraq's demise is increasingly regarded as foreordained, it's worth recalling the optimism among Iraqis four years ago.

Ali, an interpreter in Baghdad, spent his childhood in Pennsylvania and Oklahoma, where his father was completing his graduate studies. In 1987, when Ali was eleven and his father was shortly to get his green card, the family returned to Baghdad for a brief visit. But it was during the war with Iran, and the authorities refused to let them leave again. Ali had to learn Arabic from scratch. He grew up in Ghazaliya, a Baathist stronghold in western Baghdad where Shia families like his were rare. Iraq felt like a prison, and Ali considered his American childhood a paradise lost.

In 2003, soon after the arrival of the Americans, soldiers in his neighborhood persuaded him to work as an interpreter with the 82nd Airborne Division. He wore a U.S. Army uniform and a bandanna, and during interrogations he used broken Arabic in order to make prisoners think he was American. Although the work was not yet dangerous, an instinct led him to mask his identity and keep his job to himself around the neighborhood. Ali found that, although many soldiers were friendly, they often ignored information and advice from their Iraqi employees. Interpreters would give them names of insurgents, and nothing would happen. When Ali suggested that soldiers buy up locals' rocket-propelled grenade launchers so that they would not fall into the hands of insurgents, he was disregarded. When interpreters drove onto the base, their cars were searched, and at the end of their shift they would sometimes find their car doors unlocked or a mirror broken—the cars had been searched again. "People came with true faces to the Americans, with complete loyalty," Ali said. "But, from the beginning, they didn't trust us."

Ali initially worked the night shift at a base in his neighborhood and walked home by himself after midnight. In June, 2003, the Americans mounted a huge floodlight at the front gate of the base, and when Ali left for home the light projected his shadow hundreds of feet down the street. "It's dangerous," he told the soldiers at the gate. "Can't you turn it off when we go out?"

"Don't be scared," the soldiers told him. "There's a sniper protecting you all the way."

A couple of weeks later, one of Ali's Iraqi friends was hanging out with the snipers in the tower, and he thanked them. "For what?" the snipers asked. For looking out for us, Ali's friend said. The snipers didn't know what he was talking about, and when he told them they started laughing.

"We got freaked out," Ali said. The message was clear: You Iraqis are on your own.

A PERSON IN BETWEEN

The Arabic for "collaborator" is *aameel*—literally, "agent." Early in the occupation, the Baathists in Ali's neighborhood, who at first had been cowed by the Americans' arrival, began a shrewd whispering campaign. They told their neighbors that the Iraqi interpreters who went along on raids were feeding the Americans false information, urging the abuse of Iraqis, stealing houses, and raping women. In the market, a Baathist would point at an Iraqi riding in the back of a Humvee and say, "He's a traitor, a thug." Such rumors were repeated often enough that people began to believe them, especially as the promised benefits of the American occupation failed to materialize. Before long, Ali told me, the Baathists "made the reputation of the interpreter very, very low—worse than the Americans'."

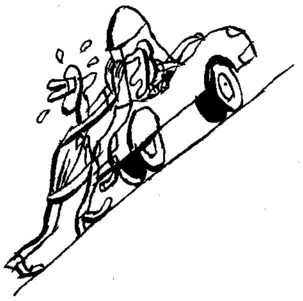
There was no American campaign to counter the word on the street; there wasn't even a sense that these subversive rumors posed a serious threat. "Americans are living in another world," Ali said. "There's an Iraqi saying: 'He's sleeping and his feet are baking in the sun.' " The U.S. typically provided interpreters with inferior or no body armor, allowing the Baathists to make a persuasive case that Americans treated all Iraqis badly, even those who worked for them.

"The Iraqis aren't trusting you, and the Americans don't trust you from the beginning," Ali said. "You became a person in between."

Firas met the personal interpreter of L. Paul Bremer III, the head of the Coalition Provisional Authority—which governed Iraq for fourteen months after the invasion—in the fall of 2003. Soon, Firas had secured a privileged view of official America, translating documents at the Republican Palace, in the Green Zone.

He liked most of the American officials who came and went at the palace. Even when he saw colossal mistakes at high levels—for example, Bremer's decision to abolish the Iraqi Army—Firas admired his new colleagues, and believed that they were helping to create institutions that would lead to a better future. And yet Firas kept being confronted by fresh ironies: he had less authority than any of the Americans, although he knew more about Iraq; and the less that Americans knew about Iraq the less they wanted to hear from him, especially if they occupied high positions.

One day, Firas accompanied one of Bremer's top political advisers to a meeting with an important Shiite cleric. The cleric's mosque, the Baratha, is an ancient Shiite bastion, and Firas, whose family came from the holy city of Najaf, knew a great deal about the mosque and the cleric. On the way, the adviser asked, "Is this a mosque or a shrine or what?" Firas said, "It's the Baratha mosque," and he started to explain its significance, but the adviser cut him short: "O.K., got it." They went into the meeting with the cleric, who was from a hard-line party backed by Tehran but who spoke as if he represented the views of all Iraqis. He didn't represent the views of many people Firas knew, and, given the chance, Firas could have told the adviser that the mosque and its Imam had a history of promoting Shia nationalism. "There were a million comments in my head," Firas recalled. "Why the hell was he paying so much attention to this Imam?"



Bremer and his advisers—Scott Carpenter, Meghan O'Sullivan, and Roman Martinez—were creating an interim constitution and negotiating the transfer of power to Iraqis, but they did not speak Arabic and had no background in the Middle East. The Iraqis they spent time with were, for the most part, returned exiles with sectarian agendas. The Americans had little sense of what ordinary Iraqis were experiencing, and they seemed oblivious of a readily available source of knowledge: the Iraqi employees who had lived in Baghdad for years, and who went home to its neighborhoods every night. "These people would consider themselves too high to listen to a translator," Firas said. "Maybe they were interested more in telling D.C. what they want to hear instead of telling them what the Iraqis are saying."

Later, when the Coalition Provisional Authority was replaced by the U.S. Embassy, and political appointees gave way to career diplomats, Firas found himself working for a different kind of American. The Embassy's political counsellor, Robert Ford, his deputy, Henry Ensher, and a younger official in the political section, Jeffrey Beals, spoke Arabic, had worked extensively in the region, and spent most of their time in Baghdad talking to a range of Iraqis, including extremists. They gave Firas and other "foreign-service nationals" more authority, encouraging them to help write reports on Iraqi politics that were sometimes forwarded to Washington. Beals would be interviewed in Arabic on Al Jazeera and then endure a thorough critique by an Iraqi colleague—Ahmed, a tall, handsome Kurdish Shiite who lived just outside Sadr City, and who was obsessed with Iraqi politics. When Firas, Ali, and Ahmed visited New York during a training trip, Beals's brother was their escort.

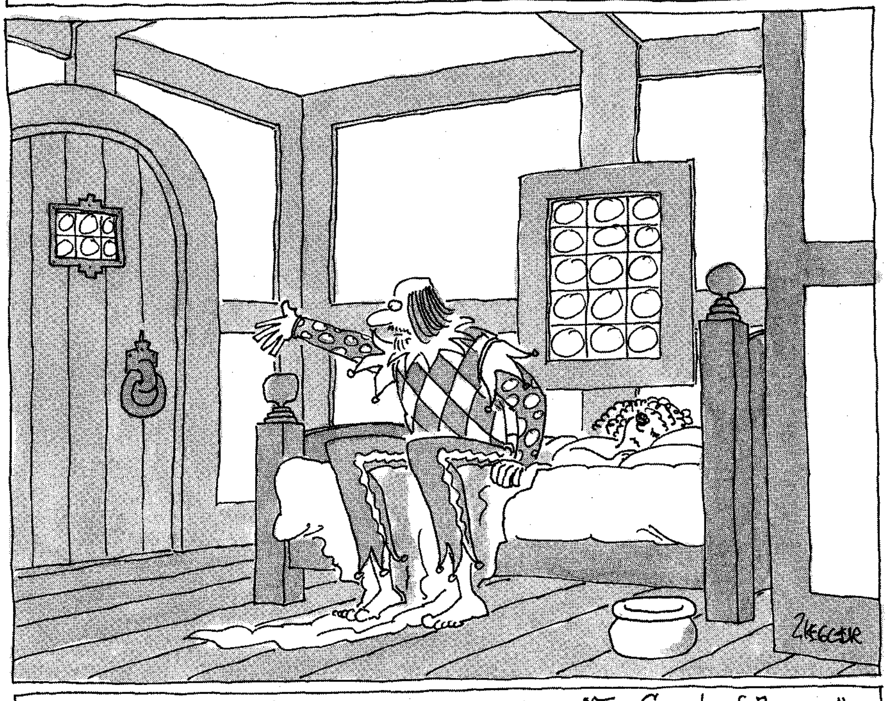
Beals quit the foreign service after almost two years in Iraq and is now studying history at Columbia University. He said that, with Americans in Baghdad coming and going every six or twelve months, "the lowest rung on your ladder ends up being the real institutional memory and repository of expertise—which is always a tension, because it's totally at odds with their status." The inversion of the power relationship between American officials and Iraqi employees became more dramatic as the dangers increased and American civilians lost almost all mobility around Baghdad. Beals said, "There aren't many people with pro-American eyes and the means to get their message across who can go into Sadr City and tell you what's happening day to day."

BADGES

On the morning of January 18, 2004, a suicide truck bomber detonated a massive payload amid a line of vehicles waiting to enter the Green Zone by the entry point known as the Assassins' Gate. Most Iraqis working in the Green Zone knew someone who died in the explosion, which incinerated twenty-five people. Ali was hit by the blowback but was otherwise uninjured; two months later, he narrowly escaped an assassination attempt while driving to work. Throughout 2004, the murder of interpreters and other Iraqi employees became increasingly commonplace. Seven of Ali's friends who worked with the U.S. military were killed, which prompted him to leave the Army and take a job at the Embassy.

In Mosul, insurgents circulated a DVD showing the decapitations of two military interpreters. American soldiers stationed there expressed sympathy to their Iraqi employees, but, one interpreter told me, there was "no *real* reaction": no offer of protection, in the form of a weapons permit or a place to live on base. He said, "The soldiers I worked with were friends and they felt sorry for us—they were good people—but they couldn't help. The people above them didn't care. Or maybe the people above *them* didn't care." This story repeated itself across the country: Iraqi employees of the U.S. military began to be kidnapped and killed in large numbers, and there was essentially no American response. Titan Corporation, of Chantilly, Virginia, which until December held the Pentagon contract for employing interpreters in Iraq, was notorious among Iraqis for mistreating its foreign staff. I spoke with an interpreter who was injured in a roadside explosion; Titan refused to compensate him for the time he spent recovering from second-degree burns on his hands and feet. An Iraqi woman working at an American base was recognized by someone she had known in college, who began calling her with death threats. She told me that when she went to the Titan representative for help he responded, "You have two choices: move or quit." She told him that if she quit and stayed home, her life would be in danger. "That's not my business," the representative said. (A Titan spokesperson said, "The safety and welfare of all employees, including, of course, contract workers, is the highest priority.")

Wm. Shakespeare gets up early, on the wrong side of the bed of a stranger, and in a clown suit....

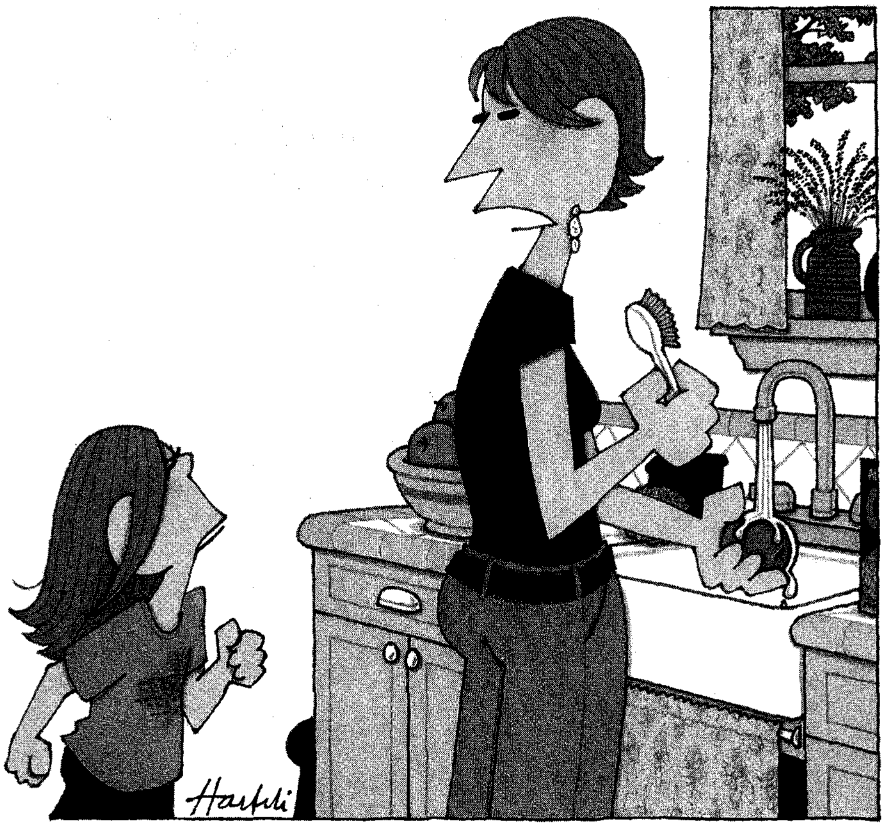


Later that same day he will commence work on "The Comedy of Errors."

A State Department official in Iraq sent a cable to Washington criticizing the Americans' "lackadaisical" attitude about helping Iraqi employees relocate. In an e-mail to me, he said, "Most of them have lived secret lives for so long that they are truly a unique 'homeless' population in Iraq's war zone—dependent on us for security and not convinced we will take care of them when we leave." It's as if the Americans never imagined that the intimidation and murder of interpreters by other Iraqis would undermine the larger American effort, by destroying the confidence of Iraqis who wanted to give it support. The problem was treated as managerial, not moral or political.

One day in January, 2005, Riyadh Hamid, a Sunni father of six from the Embassy's political section, was shot to death as he left his house for work. When Firas heard the news at the Embassy, he was deeply shaken: he, Ali, or Ahmed could be next. But he never thought of quitting. "At that time, I believed more in my cause, so if I die for it, let it be," he said.

Americans and Iraqis at the Embassy collected twenty thousand dollars in private donations for Hamid's widow. At first, the U.S. government refused to pay workmen's compensation, because Hamid had been travelling between home and work and was not technically



"When I was your age, I'd mastered repression."

on the job when he was killed. (Eventually, compensation was approved.) A few days after the murder, Robert Ford, the political counsellor, arranged a conversation between Ambassador John Negroponte and the Iraqis from the political section, whom the Ambassador had never met. The Iraqis were escorted into a room in a secure wing of the Embassy's second floor.

Negroponte had barely expressed his condolences when Firas, Ahmed, and their colleagues pressed him with a single request. They wanted identification that would allow them to enter the Green Zone through the priority lane that Americans with government clearance used, instead of having to wait every morning for an hour or two in a very long line with every other Iraqi who had business in the Green Zone. This line was an easy target for suicide bombers and insurgent lookouts (known in Iraq as *alaasa*—"chewers"). Iraqis at the Embassy had been making this request for some time, without success. "Our problem is badges," the Iraqis told the Ambassador.

Negroponte sent for the Embassy's regional security officer, John Frese. "Here's the man who is responsible for badges," Negroponte said, and left.

According to the Iraqis, they asked Frese for green badges, which were a notch below the official blue American badges. These allowed the holder to enter through the priority lane and then be searched inside the gate.

"I can't give you that," Frese said.

"Why?"

"Because it says 'Weapon permit: yes.' "

"Change the 'yes' to 'no' for us."

Frese's tone was peremptory: "I can't do that."

Ahmed made another suggestion: allow the Iraqis to use their Embassy passes to get into the priority lane. Frese again refused. Ahmed turned to one of his colleagues and said, in Arabic, "We're blowing into a punctured bag."

"My top priority is Embassy security, and I won't jeopardize it, no matter what," Frese told them, and the Iraqis understood that this security did not extend to them—if anything, they were part of the threat.

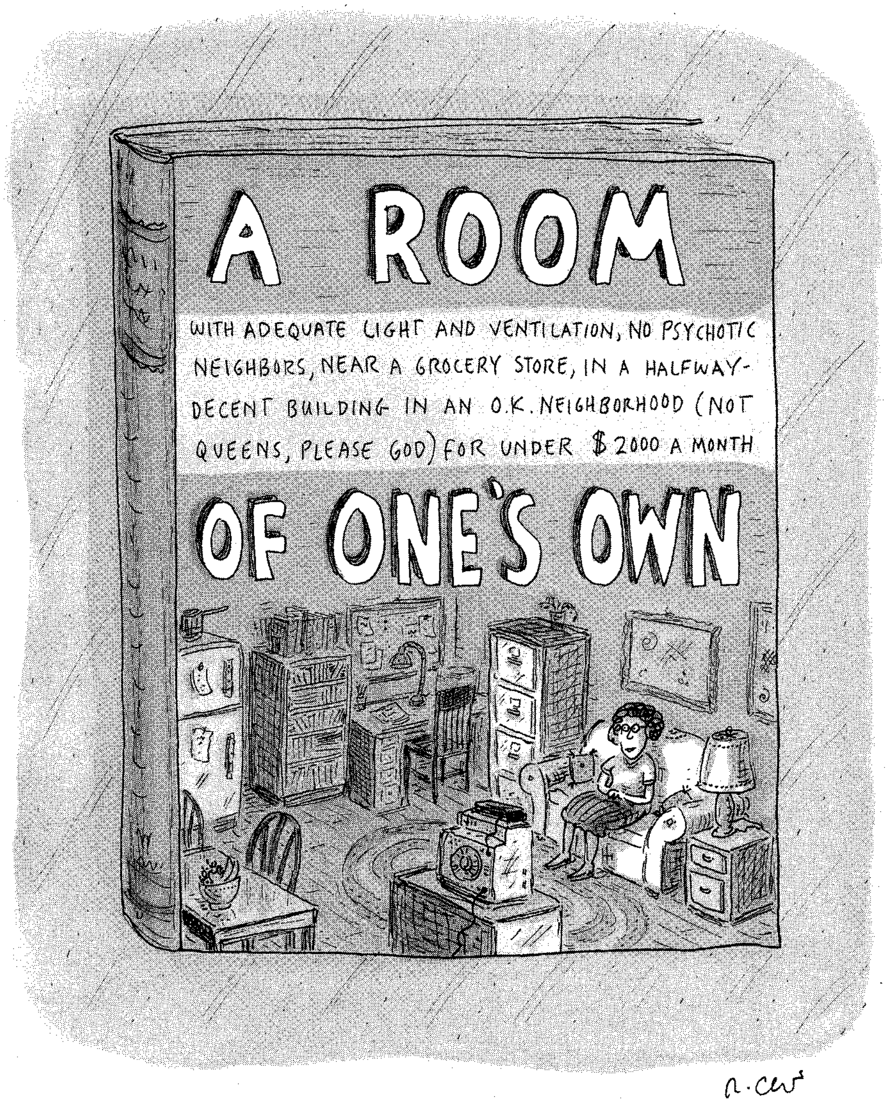
After the meeting, a junior American diplomat who had sat through it was on the verge of tears. "This is what always calmed me down," Firas said. "I saw Americans who understand me, trust me, believe me, love me. This is what always kept my rage under control and kept my hope alive."

When I recently asked a senior government official in Washington about the badges, he insisted, "They are concerns that have been raised, addressed, and satisfactorily resolved. We acted extremely expeditiously." In fact, the matter was left unresolved for almost two years, until late 2006, when verbal instructions were given to soldiers at the gates of the Green Zone to let Iraqis with Embassy passes into the priority lane—and even then individual soldiers, among whom there was rapid turnover, often refused to do so.

Americans and Iraqis recalled the meeting as the moment when the Embassy's local employees began to be disenchanted. If Negroponte had taken an interest, he could have pushed Frese to change the badges. But a diplomat doesn't rise to Negroponte's stature by busying himself with small-bore details, and without his directive the rest of the bureaucracy wouldn't budge.

In Baghdad, the regional security officer had unusual power: to investigate staff members, to revoke clearances, to block diplomats' trips outside the Green Zone. The word "security" was ubiquitous—a "magical word," one Iraqi said, that could justify anything. "Saying no to the regional security officer is a dangerous thing," according to a second former Embassy official, who occasionally did say no in order to be able to carry out his job. "You're taking a lot of responsibility on yourself." Although Iraqi employees had been vetted with background checks and took regular lie-detector tests, a permanent shadow of suspicion lay over them because they lived outside the Green Zone. Firas once attended a briefing at which the regional security officer told newly arrived Americans that no Iraqi could be trusted.

The reminders were constant. Iraqi staff members were not allowed into the gym or the food court near the Embassy. Banned from the military PX,


A ROOM
WITH ADEQUATE LIGHT AND VENTILATION, NO PSYCHOTIC NEIGHBORS, NEAR A GROCERY STORE, IN A HALFWAY-DECENT BUILDING IN AN O.K. NEIGHBORHOOD (NOT QUEENS, PLEASE GOD) FOR UNDER $2000 A MONTH
OF ONE'S OWN

they had to ask an American supervisor to buy them a pair of sunglasses or underwear. These petty humiliations were compounded by security officers who easily crossed the line between vigilance and bullying.

One day in late 2004, Laith, who had never given up hope of working for the American Embassy, did well on an interview in the Green Zone and was called to undergo a polygraph. After he was hooked up to the machine, the questions began: Have you ever lied to your family? Do you know any insurgents? At some point, he thought too hard about his answer; when the test was over, the technician called in a security officer and shouted at Laith: "Do you think you can fuck with the United States? Who sent you here?" Laith was hustled out to the gate, where the technician promised to tell his employers at the National Endowment for Democracy to fire him.

"That was the first time I hated the Americans," Laith said.

CORRIDORS OF POWER

In January, 2005, Kirk Johnson, a twenty-four-year-old from Illinois, arrived in Baghdad as an information officer with the United States Agency for International Development. He came from a patriotic family that believed in public service; his father was a lawyer whose chance at an open seat in Congress, in 1986, was blocked when the state Republican Party chose a former wrestling coach named Dennis Hastert to run instead. Johnson, an Arabic speaker, was studying Islamist thought as a Fulbright scholar in Cairo when the war began; when he arrived in Baghdad, he became one of U.S.A.I.D.'s few Arabic-speaking Americans in Iraq.

Johnson, who is rangy, earnest, and baby-faced, thought that he was going to help America rebuild Iraq, in a mission that was his generation's calling. Instead, he found a "narcotic" atmosphere in the Green Zone. Surprisingly few Americans ever ventured outside its gates. A short drive from the Embassy, at the Blue Star Café—famous for its chicken fillet and fries—contractors could be seen, in golf shirts, khakis, and baseball caps, enjoying a leisurely lunch, their Department of Defense badges draped around their necks. At such moments, it was hard not to have uncharitable thoughts about the war—that Americans today aren't equipped for something of this magnitude. Iraq is that rare war in which people put on weight. An Iraqi woman at the Embassy who had seen many Americans come and go—and revered a few of them—declared that seventy per cent of them were "useless, crippled," avoiding debt back home or escaping a bad marriage. I met an American official who, during one year, left the Green Zone less than half a dozen times; unlike many of his colleagues, he understood this to be a problem.

The deeper the Americans dug themselves into the bunker, the harder they tried to create a sense of normalcy, resulting in what Johnson called "a bizarre arena of paperwork and booze." There were karaoke nights and volleyball leagues, the Baghdad Regatta, and "Country Night—One Howdy-Doody Good Time." Halliburton, the defense contractor, hosted a Middle Eastern Night. The cubicles in U.S.A.I.D.'s new Baghdad office building, Johnson discovered, were exactly the same as the cubicles at its headquarters in Washington. The more chaotic Iraq became, the more the Americans resorted to bureaucratic gestures of control. The fact that it took five signatures to get Adobe Acrobat installed on a computer was strangely comforting.

Johnson learned that Iraqis were third-class citizens in the Green Zone, after Americans and other foreigners. For a time, Americans were ordered to wear body armor while outdoors; when Johnson found out that Iraqi staff members hadn't been provided with any, he couldn't bear to wear his own around them. Superiors eventually ordered him to do so. "If you're still properly calibrated, it can be a shameful sort of existence there," Johnson said. "It takes a certain amount of self-delusion not to be brought down by it."

In October, 2004, two bombs killed four Americans and two Iraqis at a café and a shopping center inside the Green Zone, fuelling the suspicion that there were enemies within. The Iraqi employees became perceived as part of an undifferentiated menace. They also induced a deeper, more elusive form of paranoia. As Johnson put it, "Not that we thought they'd do us bodily harm, but they represented the reality beyond those blast walls. You keep your distance from these Iraqis, because if you get close you start to discover it's absolute bullshit—the lives of people in Baghdad aren't safer, in spite of our trend lines or ginned-up reports by contractors that tell you everything is going great."

After eight months in the Green Zone, Johnson felt that the impulse which had originally made him volunteer to work in Iraq was dying. He got a transfer to Falluja, to work on the front lines of the insurgency.

The Iraqis who saw both sides of the Green Zone gates had to be as alert as prey in a jungle of predators. Ahmed, the Kurdish Shiite, had the job of reporting on Shia issues, and his feel for the mood in Sadr City was crucial to the political section. When a low-flying American helicopter tore a Shia religious flag off a radio tower, Ahmed immediately picked up on rumors, started by the Mahdi Army, that Americans were targeting Shia worshippers. His job required him to seek contact with members of Shiite militias, who sometimes reacted to him with suspicion. He once went to a council meeting near Sadr City that had been called to arrange a truce between the Americans and the Mahdi Army so that garbage could be cleared from the streets. A council member confronted Ahmed, demanding to know who he was. Ahmed responded, "I'm from a Korean organization. They sent me to find out what solution you guys come up with. Then we're ready to fund the cleanup." At another meeting, he identified himself as a correspondent from an Iraqi television network. No one outside his immediate family knew where he worked.

Ahmed took two taxis to the Green Zone, then walked the last few hundred yards, or drove a different route every day. He carried a decoy phone and hid his Embassy phone in his car. He had always loved the idea of wearing a jacket and tie in an official job, but he had to keep them in his office at the Embassy—it was impossible to drive to work dressed like that. Ahmed and the other Iraqis entered code names for friends and colleagues into their phones, in case they were kidnapped. Whenever they got a call in public from an American contact, they answered in Arabic and immediately hung up. They communicated mostly by text message. They never spoke English in front of their children. One Iraqi employee slept in his car in the Green Zone parking lot for several nights, because it was too dangerous to go home.

Baghdad, which has six million residents, at least provided the cover of anonymity. In a small Shia city in the south, no one knew that a twenty-six-year-old Shiite named Hussein was working for the Americans. "I lie and lie and lie," he said. He acted as a go-between, carrying information between the U.S. outpost, the local government, the Shia clergy, and the radical Sadrists. The Americans would send him to a meeting of clerics with a question, such as whether Iranian influence was fomenting violence. Instead of giving a direct answer, the clerics would demand to know why thousands of American soldiers were unable to protect Shia travellers on a ten-kilometre stretch of road. Hussein would take this back to the Americans and receive a "yes-slash-no kind of answer: We will take it up, we'll get back to them soon—the soon becomes never." In this way, he was privy to both sides of the deepening mutual disenchantment. The fact that he had no contact with Sunnis did not make Hussein feel any safer: by 2004, Shia militias were also targeting Iraqis who worked with Americans.

As a youth, Hussein was an overweight misfit obsessed with Second World War documentaries, and now he felt grateful to the Americans for freeing him from Saddam's tyranny. He also took a certain pride and pleasure in carrying off his risky job. "I'm James Bond, without the nice lady or the famous gadgets," he said. He worked out of a series of rented rooms, seldom going out in public, relying on his cell phone and his laptop, keeping a small "runaway bag" with him in case he needed to leave quickly (a neighbor once informed him that some strangers had asked who lived there, and Hussein moved out the same day). Every few days, he brought his laundry to his parents' house. He stopped seeing friends, and his life winnowed down to his work. "You have to live two separate lives, one visible and the other one invisible," Hussein told me when we spoke in Erbil. (He insisted on meeting in Kurdistan, because there was nowhere else in Iraq that he felt safe being seen with me.) "You have to always be aware of the car behind you. When you want to park, you make sure that the car passes you. You're always afraid of a person staring at you in an abnormal way."

He received three threats. The first was graffiti written across his door, the second a note left outside his house. Both said, "Leave your job or we'll kill you." The third came in December, after American soldiers killed a local militia leader who had been one of Hussein's most important contacts. A friend approached Hussein and conveyed an anonymous warning: "You better not have anything to do with this event. If you do, you'll have to take the consequences." Since Hussein was known to have interpreted for American soldiers at the start of the war, he said, his name had long been on the Mahdi Army's blacklist. It was not just frightening but also embarrassing to be a suspect in the militia leader's death; it undermined Hussein in the eyes of his carefully cultivated contacts. "The stamp that comes to you will never go—you will stay a spy," he said.

He informed his American supervisor, as he had after the previous two threats. And the reply was the same: lie low, take a leave with pay. Hussein had warm feelings for his supervisor, but he wanted a transfer to another country in the Middle East or a scholarship offer to the U.S.—some tangible sign that his

safety mattered to them. None was forthcoming. Once, in April, 2004, when the Mahdi Army had overrun Coalition posts all over southern Iraq, he had asked to be evacuated along with the Americans and was refused; his pride wouldn't let him ask again. Soon after Hussein received his third threat, his supervisor left Iraq.

"You are now belonging to no side," Hussein said.

In June, 2006, with kidnappings and sectarian killings out of control in Baghdad, the number of Iraqis working in the Embassy's public-affairs section dropped from nine to four; most of those who quit fled the country. The Americans began to replace them with Jordanians. The switch was deeply unpopular with the remaining Iraqis, who understood that it involved the fundamental issue of trust: Jordanians could be housed in the Green Zone without fear (Iraqis could secure temporary housing for only a limited time); Jordanians were issued badges that allowed them into the Embassy without being searched; they weren't subject to threat and blackmail, because they lived inside the Green Zone. In every way, Jordanians were easier to deal with. But they also knew nothing about Iraq. One former Embassy official, who considered the new policy absurd, lamented that a Jordanian couldn't possibly understand that the term "February 8th mustache," say, referred to the 1963 Baathist coup.

In the past year, the U.S. government has lost a quarter of its two hundred and six Iraqi employees, and many have been replaced by Jordanians. Not long ago, the U.S. began training citizens of the Republic of Georgia to fill the jobs of Iraqis in Baghdad. "I don't know why it's better to have these people flown into Iraq and secure them in the Green Zone," a State Department official said. "Why wouldn't we bring Iraqis into the Green Zone and give *them* housing and secure *them*?" He added, "We're depriving people of jobs and we're getting them whacked. It's not a pretty picture."

On June 6th, amid the exodus of Iraqis from the public-affairs section, an Embassy official sent a six-page cable to Washington whose subject line read "Public Affairs Staff Show Strains of Social Discord." The cable described the nightmarish lives of the section's Iraqi employees and the sectarian tensions rising among them. It was an astonishingly candid report, perhaps aimed at forcing the State Department to confront the growing disaster. The cable was leaked to the Washington *Post* and briefly became a political liability. One sentence has stuck in my mind: "A few staff members approached us to ask what provisions we would make for them if we evacuate."

I went to Baghdad in January partly because I wanted to find an answer to this question. Were there contingency plans for Iraqis, and, if so, whom did they include, and would the Iraqis have to wait for a final American departure? Would any Iraqis be evacuated to the U.S.? No one at the Embassy was willing to speak on the record about Iraqi staff, except an official spokesman, Lou Fintor, who read me a statement: "Like all residents of Baghdad, our local employees must attempt to maintain their daily routines despite the disruptions caused by terrorists, extremists, and criminals. The new Iraqi government is taking steps to improve the security situation and essential services in Baghdad. The Iraq security forces, in coördination with coalition forces, are now engaged in a wide-range effort to stabilize the security situation in Baghdad. . . . President Bush strongly reaffirmed our commitment to work with the government of Iraq to answer the needs of all Iraqis."

I was granted an interview with two officials, who refused to be named. One of them consulted talking points that catalogued what the Embassy had done for Iraqi employees: a Thanksgiving dinner, a recent thirty-five-per-cent salary increase. Housing in the Green Zone could be made available for a week at a time in critical cases, I was told, though most Iraqis didn't want to be apart from their families. When I asked about contingency plans for evacuation, the second official refused to discuss it on security grounds, but he said, "If we reach that point and have people in danger, the Ambassador would go to the Secretary of State and ask that they be evacuated, and I think they would do it." The department was reviewing the possibility of issuing special immigrant visas.

To receive this briefing, I had passed through three security doors into the Embassy's classified section, where there were no Iraqis and no natural light; it seemed as if every molecule of Baghdad air had been sealed off behind the last security door. The Embassy officials struck me as decent, overworked people, yet I left the interview with a feeling of shame. The problem lay not with the individuals but with the institution and, beyond that, with the politics of the American project in Iraq, which from the beginning has been conducted under the illusion that controlling the message mattered more than the reality. A former official at the Embassy told me, "When we say that the corridors of power are insulated, is it that the officials aren't receiving the information, or is it because the construct under which they're operating doesn't even allow them to absorb it?" To admit that Iraqis who work with Americans need to be evacuated would blow a hole in the Administration's version of the war.

Several days after the interview at the Embassy, I had a more frank conversation with an official there. "I don't know if it's fair to say, 'You work at an embassy of a foreign country, so that country has to evacuate you,' " he said. "Do the Australians have a plan? Do the Romanians? The Turks? The British?" He added, "If I worked at the Hungarian Embassy in Washington, would the Hungarians evacuate me from the United States?"

When I mentioned these remarks to Othman, he asked, "Would the Americans behead an American working at the Hungarian Embassy in Washington?"

THE HEARTS OF YOUR ALLIES

In the summer of 2006, Iraqis were fleeing the country at the rate of forty thousand per month. The educated middle class of Baghdad was decamping to Jordan and Syria, taking with them the skills and the more secular ideas necessary for rebuilding a destroyed society, leaving the city to the religious militias—eastern Baghdad was controlled by the poor and increasingly radical Shia, the western districts dominated by Sunni insurgents. House by house, the capital was being ethnically cleansed.

By that time, Firas, Ali, and Ahmed had been working with the Americans for several years. Their commitment and loyalty were beyond doubt. Just going to work in the morning required an extraordinary ability to disregard danger. Panic, Firas realized, could trap you: when the threat came, you felt you were a dead man no matter where you turned, and your mind froze and you sat at home waiting for them to come for you. In order to function, Firas simply blocked out the fear. "My friends at work became the only friends I have," he said. "My entertainment is at work, my pleasure is at work, everything is at work." Firas and his friends never imagined that the decision to leave Iraq would be forced on them not by the violence beyond the Green Zone but from within the Embassy itself.

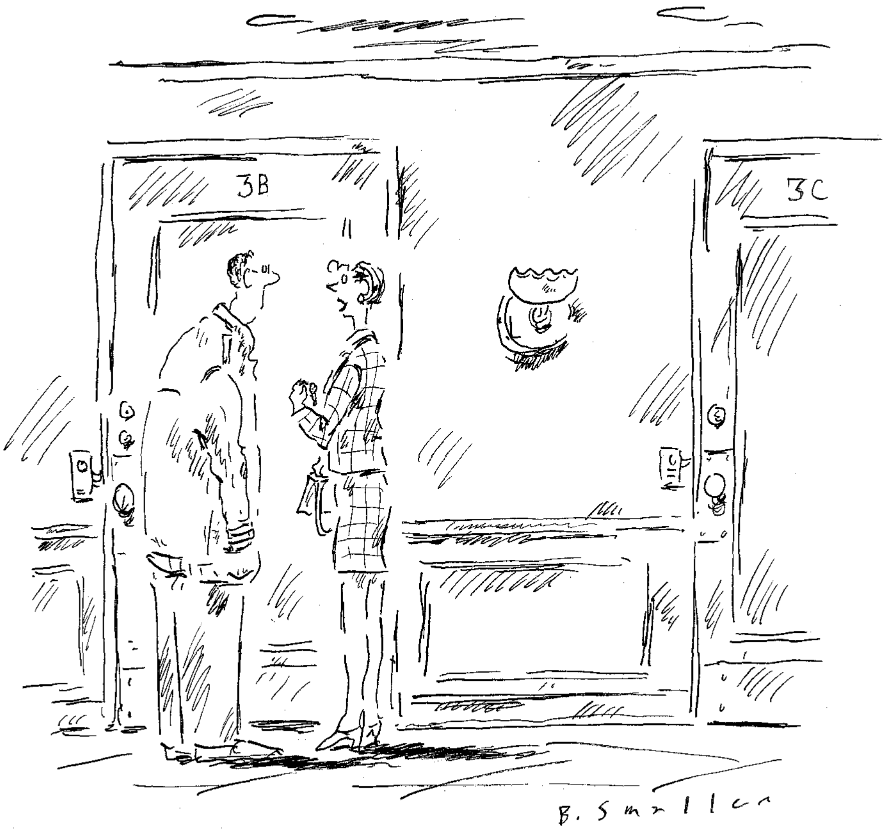
After the bombing of the gold-domed Shia mosque in Samarra that February, Sadr City had become the base for the Mahdi Army's roving death squads. Ahmed's neighborhood fell under their complete control, and his drive to work took him through numerous unfriendly—and thorough—militia checkpoints. Strangers began to ask about him. A falafel vender in Sadr City whose stall was often surrounded by Mahdi Army *alaasa* warned Ahmed that his name had come up. On two occasions, people he scarcely knew approached him and expressed concern about his well-being. One evening, an American official named Oliver Moss, with whom Ahmed was close, walked him out of the Embassy to the parking lot and said, "Ahmed, I know you work for us, but if something happens to you we won't be able to do anything for you." Ahmed asked for a cot in a Green Zone trailer and was given the yes/no answer—equal parts personal sympathy and bureaucratic delay—which sometimes felt worse than a flat refusal. The chaos in Baghdad had created a landgrab for Green Zone accommodations, and the Iraqi government was distributing coveted apartments to friends of the political parties while evicting Iraqis who worked with the Americans. The interpreters were distrusted and despised even by officials of the new government that the Americans had helped bring to power.

In April, a Shiite member of the parliament asked Ahmed to look into the status of a Mahdi Army member who had been detained by the Americans. Iraqis at the Embassy sometimes used their office to do small favors for their compatriots; such gestures reminded them that they were serving Iraq as well as America. But Ahmed sent his inquiry through the wrong channel. His supervisor was on leave in the U.S., and so he sent an e-mail to a reserve colonel in the political section. The colonel refused to provide him with any information, and a couple of weeks later, in May, Ahmed was summoned to talk to an agent from the regional security office.

To the Iraqis, a summons of this type was frightening. Ahmed and his friends had seen several colleagues report to the regional security office and never appear at their desks again, with no explanation; one had been turned over to the Iraqi police and was jailed for several weeks. "Don't go. They're going to arrest you," Ali told Ahmed. "Just quit. It's not worth it." Ahmed did not listen.

The agent, Barry Hale, who carried a Glock pistol, questioned Ahmed for an hour about his contacts with Sadrists. The notion that Ahmed's job required him to have contact with the Mahdi Army seemed foreign to Hale, as did the need to have well-informed Iraqis in the political section of the Embassy. According to an American official close to the case, Hale had a general distrust of Iraqis and wanted to replace them with Jordanians. Another official spoke of a "paranoia partly founded on ignorance. If Ahmed wanted to hurt an American, he could have done it very easily in the three years he worked with us."

Robert Ford, the political counsellor, spoke to top officials at the Embassy to insure that Ahmed—whom several Americans described as the best Iraqi employee they had worked with—would be "counselled" but not fired. Everyone assumed that the case was closed. But over the summer, after Ford's service in Baghdad ended, Hale started to pursue Ahmed again. "It was a witch hunt," one of the officials said. "They wanted to fire him and they were just looking for a reason. They decided he was a threat." The irony of his situation was not lost on Ahmed: he was sus-



"I don't want to be alone when I'm old, either, so when we're old let's get back in touch."

pected of giving information to a militia that would kill him instantly if they knew where he worked.

In late July, Hale summoned Ahmed again. On Hale's desk, Ahmed saw a thick file marked "Secret," next to a pair of steel handcuffs.

"Did you ever get a phone call from the Mahdi Army?" Hale asked.

"I'll be lucky if I get a phone call from them," Ahmed replied. "My supervisor will be very happy."

The interrogation came down to one point: Hale insisted that Ahmed had misled him by saying that the reserve colonel had "never answered" Ahmed's inquiry, when in fact the colonel had sent back an e-mail asking who had given Ahmed the detainee's name. Ahmed hadn't considered this an answer to his question about the detainee's status, and therefore hadn't mentioned it to Hale. This was his undoing.

When Ahmed returned to his desk, Firas and Ali embraced him and congratulated him on escaping detention. Meanwhile, lower-ranking Embassy officials began frantically calling and e-mailing colleagues in Washington, some of whom tried to intervene on Ahmed's behalf. But by then it was too late. The new Ambassador, Zalmay Khalilzad, and his deputy were out of the country, and the official in charge of the Embassy was Ford's replacement, Margaret Scobey, a new arrival in Baghdad, who had no idea of Ahmed's value. Firas said of her, "She was really not into the Iraqis in the office." Some Americans and Iraqis described her as a notetaker for the Ambassador who sent oddly upbeat reports back to Washington. Two days after the second interrogation, Scobey signed off on Ahmed's termination, and ordered a junior officer named Rebecca Fong to go down to Ahmed's office and, in front of his tearful American and Iraqi colleagues, fire him.

Ahmed later told an American official, "I think the U.S. is still in a war. I don't think you're going to win this war if you don't win the hearts of your allies." The State Department refused to discuss the case for reasons of privacy and security.

Ahmed's firing demoralized Americans and Iraqis alike. Fong transferred out of the political section. For Firas, it meant that, no matter how long he worked with the Americans and how many risks he took, he, too, would ultimately be discarded. He began to tell himself, "My turn is coming, my turn is coming"—a perverse echo of his mantra before the fall of Saddam. The Iraqis now felt that, as Ali said, "Heaven doesn't want us and Hell doesn't want us. Where will we go?" If the Americans were turning against them, they had no friends at all.

Three days after Ahmed's departure, Scobey appeared in the Iraqis' office to say that she was sorry but there was nothing she could have done for Ahmed. Firas listened in disgust before bursting out, "All the sacrifices, all the work, all *the devotion mean nothing to you.* We are still terrorists in your eyes." When, a month later, Khalilzad met with a large group of Iraqi employees to hear their concerns, Firas attended reluctantly. After the Iraqis raised the possibility of immigrant visas to the U.S., Khalilzad said, "We want the good Iraqi people to stay in the country." An Iraqi replied, "If we're still alive." Firas, speaking last, told the Ambassador, "We are tense all the time, we don't know what we are doing, right or wrong. Some Iraqis are more afraid in the Embassy than in the Red Zone"—that is, Baghdad. There was a ripple of laughter among the Iraqis, and Khalilzad couldn't suppress a smile.

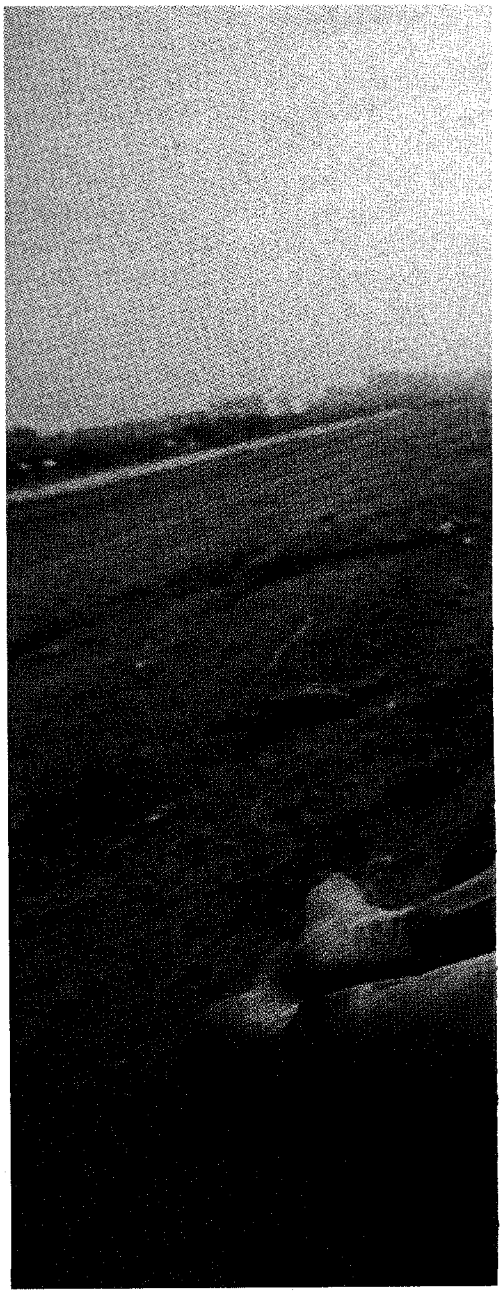
At this point, Firas knew that he would leave Iraq. Through the efforts of Rebecca Fong and Oliver Moss—who pulled strings with counterparts in European embassies in Baghdad—Ahmed, Firas, and Ali obtained visas to Europe. By November, they were gone.

JOHNSON'S LIST

On the morning of October 13th, an Iraqi official with U.S.A.I.D. named Yaghdan left his house in western Baghdad, in search of fuel for his generator. He saw a scrap of paper lying by the garage door. It was a torn sheet of copybook paper—the kind that his agency distributed to schools around Iraq, with date and subject lines printed in English and Arabic. The paper bore a message, in Arabic: "We will cut off heads and throw them in the garbage." Nearby, against the garden fence, lay the severed upper half of a small dog.

Yaghdan (who wanted his real name used) was a mild, conscientious thirty-year-old from a family of struggling businessmen. Since taking a job with the Americans, in 2003, he had been so cautious that, at first, he couldn't imagine how his cover had been blown. Then he remembered: Two weeks earlier, as he was showing his badge at the bridge offering entry into the Green Zone, Yaghdan had noticed a man from his neighborhood standing in the same line, watching him. The neighbor worked as a special guard with a Shia militia and must have been the *alaas* who betrayed him.

Yaghdan's request for a transfer to a post outside the country was never an-



A man's body on a trash heap near Baghdad.

swered. Instead, U.S.A.I.D. offered him a month's leave with pay or residence for six months in the agency compound in the Green Zone, which would have meant a long separation from his young wife. Yaghdan said, "I thought, I should not be selfish and put myself as a priority. It wasn't a happy decision." Within a week of the threat, Yaghdan and his wife flew to Dubai, in the United Arab Emirates.

Yaghdan sent his résumé to several companies in Dubai, highlighting his years of service with an American contractor and U.S.A.I.D. He got a call from a legal office that needed an administrative assistant. "Did you work in the U.S.?" the interviewer asked him. Yaghdan said that his work had been in Iraq. "Oh, in Iraq . . ." He could feel the interviewer pulling back. A man at another office said, "Oh, you worked against Saddam? You betrayed Saddam? The American people are stealing Iraq." Yaghdan, who is not given to bitterness, finally lost his cool: "No, the Arab people are stealing Iraq!" He didn't get the job. He was amazed—even in cosmopolitan Dubai, people loved Saddam, especially after his botched execution, in late December. Yaghdan's résumé was an encumbrance. Iraqis were considered bad Arabs, and Iraqis who worked with the Americans were traitors. The slogans and illusions of Arab nationalism, which had seemed to collapse with the regime of Saddam, were being given a second life by the American failure in Iraq. What hurt Yaghdan most was the looks that said, "You trusted the Americans—and see what happened to you."

Yaghdan then contacted many American companies, thinking that they, at least, would look favorably on his service. He wasn't granted a single interview. The only work he could find was as a gofer in the office of a Dubai cleaning company.

Yaghdan's Emirates visa expired in mid-January, and he had to leave the

LAIF/REDUX

Ghazaliya neighborhood. The man's identity could not be determined. Photograph by Christoph Bangert.

country and renew the visa in Amman. I met him there. The Jordanians had been turning away young Iraqis at the border and the airport for several months, but they issued Yaghdan and his wife three-day visas, after which they had to pay a daily fine, on top of hotel bills. After a week's delay, the visas came through, but, upon returning to Dubai, Yaghdan learned that the Emirates would no longer extend the visas of Iraqis. A job offer as an administrative assistant came from a university in Qatar, but the Qataris wouldn't grant him a visa without a security clearance from the Iraqi Ministry of the Interior, which was in the hands of the Shia party whose militia had sent him the death threat. He couldn't even become a refugee, which would have given him some protection against deportation, because the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees had closed its Emirates office years ago. Yaghdan had heard that the only way to get a U.S. visa was through a job offer—nearly impossible to obtain—or by marrying an American, so he didn't bother to try. He had reached the end of his legal options and would have to return to Iraq by April 1st. "It's like taking the decision to commit suicide," he said.

THE DEATH OF THE PAINTER

At the end of his life
he had money and attention,
and certain towns were known
in connection to his name.

He was fastidious, and wore a tie,
was photographed with brushes, with a bird.
Under the subtropical sky
he forgave the things long done.
He hardly saw his children,
by habit was self-absorbed. His atelier
was sacrosanct, with the ocean for a view.
When he painted, it was descent
and descent and descent from the cross,
and when he died

the sepulchre was simple.
His late-life love
wept from another room.

—*James Arthur*

While Yaghdan was in Dubai, news of his dilemma made its way through the U.S.A.I.D. grapevine to Kirk Johnson, the young Arabic speaker who had asked to be transferred to Falluja. By then, Johnson's life had been turned upside down as well.

In Falluja, Johnson had supervised Iraqis who were clearing out blocked irrigation canals along the Euphrates River. His job was dangerous and seldom rewarding, but it gave him the sense of purpose that he had sought in Iraq. Determined to experience as much as possible, he went out several times a week in a Marine convoy to meet tribal sheikhs and local officials. As he rode through Falluja's lethal streets, Johnson eyed every bag of trash and parked car for hidden bombs, and practiced swatting away imaginary grenades. After a local sniper shot several marines, Johnson's anxiety rose even higher.

In December, 2005, after twelve exhausting months in Iraq, during which he lost forty pounds, Johnson went on leave and met his parents for a Christmas vacation in the Dominican Republic. In the middle of the night, Johnson rose unconscious from his hotel bed and climbed onto a ledge outside the second-floor window. A night watchman noticed him staring at an unfinished concrete apartment complex across the road. The night before, the sight of the building had triggered his fear of the sniper, and he had instinctively dropped to the floor of his room. Standing on the ledge, he shouted something and then fell fifteen feet.

Johnson tore open his jaw and forehead and broke his nose, teeth, and wrists. He required numerous surgeries on his shattered face, and stayed in the hospital for several weeks. But it was much longer before he could accept that he would not rejoin the marines and Iraqis he had left in Falluja. There were rumors in Iraq that he had been drunk and was trying to avoid returning. Back home in Illinois, healing in his childhood bed, he dreamed every night that he was in Iraq, unable to save people, or else in mortal peril himself.

In January, 2006, Paul Bremer came through Chicago to promote his book, "My Year in Iraq." Johnson sat in one of the front rows, ready to challenge Bremer's upbeat version of the reconstruction, but during the question period Bremer avoided the young man with the bandaged face who was frantically waving his arms, which were still in casts.

Johnson moved to Boston, but he kept thinking about his failure to return to Iraq. One day, he heard the news about Yaghdan, whom he had known in Baghdad, and that night he barely slept. It suddenly occurred to him that this was an injustice he could address. He could send money; he could alert journalists and politicians. He wrote a detailed account of Yaghdan's situation and sent it to his congressman, Dennis Hastert. But Hastert's office, which was reeling from the Mark Foley scandal and the midterm elections, told Johnson that it could not help Yaghdan. Johnson wrote an op-ed article calling for asylum for Yaghdan and others like him, and on December 15th it ran in the Los Angeles *Times*. A U.S.A.I.D. official in Baghdad sent it around to colleagues. Then Johnson began to hear from Iraqis.

First, it was people he knew—former colleagues in desperate circumstances like Yaghdan's. Iraqis forwarded his article to other Iraqis, and he started to compile a list of names; by January he was getting e-mails from strangers with subject lines like "Can you help me Please?" and "I want to be on the list." An Iraqi woman who had worked for the Coalition Provisional Authority attached a letter of recommendation written in 2003 by Bernard Kerik, then Iraq's acting Minister of the Interior. It proclaimed, "Your courage to support the Coalition forces has sent home an irrefutable message: that terror will not rule, that liberty will triumph, and that the seeds of freedom will be planted into the hearts of the great citizens of Iraq." The woman was now a refugee in Amman.

A former U.S.A.I.D. procurement agent named Ibrahim wrote that he was stranded in Egypt after having paid traffickers twelve thousand dollars to smuggle him from Baghdad to Dubai to Mumbai to Alexandria, with the goal of reaching Europe. When the Egyptian police figured out the scheme, Ibrahim took shelter in a friend's flat in a Cairo slum. The Egyptians, wary of a popular backlash against rising Shia influence in the Middle East, were denying Iraqis legal status there. Ibrahim didn't know where to go next: in addition to his immigration troubles, he had an untreated brain tumor.

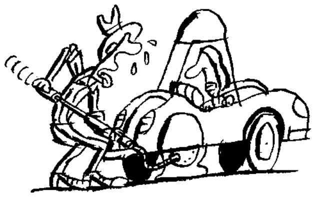
By the first week of February, Johnson's list had grown to more than a hundred names. Working tirelessly, he had found a way to channel his desire to do something for Iraq. He assembled the information on a spreadsheet, and on February 5th he took it with him on a bus to Washington—along with Yaghdan's threat letter and a picture of the severed dog.

Toward the end of January, I travelled to Damascus. Iraqis were tolerated by Syria, which opened its doors in the name of Arab brotherhood. Yet Syria offered them no prospect of earning a living: few Iraqis could get work permits.

About a million Iraqis were now in Syria. Every morning that I visited, there were long lines outside the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees office in central Damascus. Forty-five thousand Iraqis had officially registered as refugees, and more were signing up every day, amid reports that the Syrian regime was about to tighten its visa policy and had begun turning people back at the border.

One chilly night, I went to Sayyida Zainab, a neighborhood centered around the shrine of the sister of Hussein, grandson of the Prophet and the central martyr of Shiism. This had become an Iraqi Shia district, and on the main street were butcher shops and kebab stands that reminded me of commercial streets in Baghdad. There were pictures of Shia martyrs, and also of Moqtada al-Sadr, outside the real-estate offices, some of which, I was told, were fronts for brothels. (Large numbers of Iraqi women make their living in Syria as prostitutes.) Shortly before midnight, buses from Baghdad began to pull into a parking lot where boys were still up, playing soccer. One bus had a shattered windshield from gunfire at the start of its journey. A minibus driver told me that the trip took fourteen hours, including a long wait at the border, and that the road through Iraq was menaced by insurgents, criminal gangs, and American patrols. And yet some Iraqis who had run out of money in Damascus hired the driver to take them back to Baghdad the same night. "No one is left there," he said. "Only those who are too poor to leave, and those with a bad omen on their heads, who will be killed in one of three ways—kidnapping, car bomb, or militias."

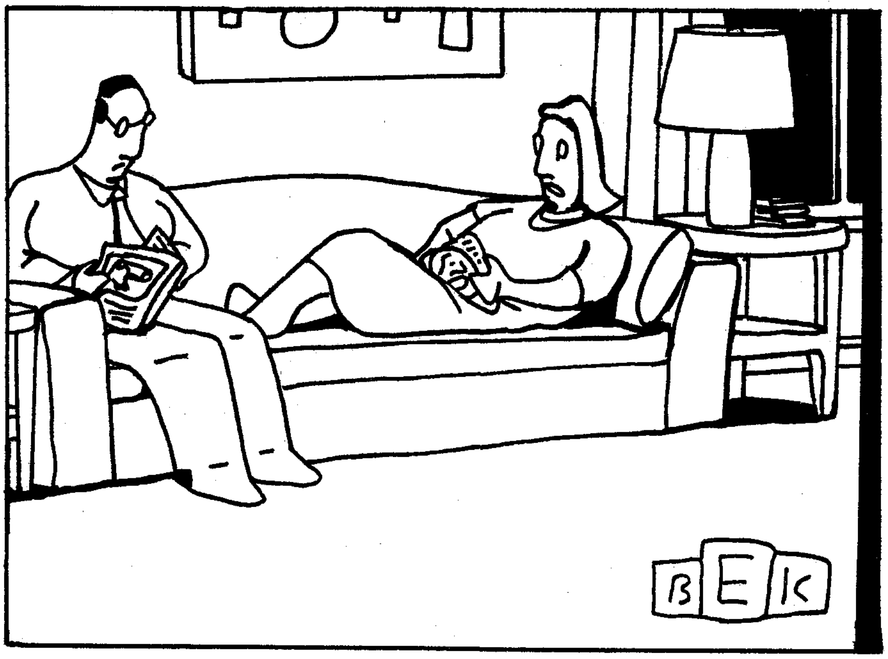
In another Damascus neighborhood, I met a family of four that had just arrived from Baghdad after receiving a warning from insurgents to abandon their house. They had settled in a three-room apartment and were huddled around a kerosene heater. They were middle-class people who had left almost everything behind—the mother had sold her gold and jewelry to pay for plane tickets to Damascus—and the son and daughter hadn't been able to finish school. The daughter, Zamzam, was seventeen, and in the past few months she had been seeing corpses in the streets on her way to school, some of them eaten by dogs because no one dared to take them away. On days when there was fighting in her neighborhood, Zamzam said, walking to school felt like a death wish. Her laptop computer had a picture of an American flag as its screen saver, but it also had recordings of insurgent ballads in praise of a famous Baghdad sniper. She was an energetic, ambitious girl, but her dark eyes had the haunted look of a much older woman.



I spent a couple of hours walking with the family around the souk and the grand Umayyad Mosque in the old city center. The parents strolled arm in arm—enjoying, they said, a ritual that had been impossible in Baghdad for the past two years. I left them outside a theatre where a comedy featuring an all-Iraqi cast was playing to packed houses of refugees. The play was called "Homesick."

In the past few months, Western and Arab governments announced that they would no longer honor Iraqi passports issued after the 2003 invasion, since the passport had been so shoddily produced that it was subject to widespread forgery. This was the first passport many Iraqis had ever owned, and it was now worthless. Iraqis with Saddam-era passports were also out of luck, because the Iraqi government had cancelled them. A new series of passports was being printed, but the Ministry of the Interior had ordered only around twenty thousand copies, an Iraqi official told me, far too few to meet the need—which meant that obtaining a valid passport, like buying gas or heating oil, would become subject to black-market influences. In Baghdad, Othman told me that a new passport would cost him six hundred dollars, paid to a fixer with connections at the passport offices. The Ministry of the Interior refused to allow Iraqi Embassies to print the new series, so refugees outside Iraq who needed valid passports would have to return to the country they had fled or pay someone a thousand dollars to do it for them.

Between October, 2005, and September, 2006, the United States admitted two hundred and two Iraqis as refugees, most of them from the years under Saddam. Last year, the Bush Administration increased the allotment to five hundred. By the end of 2006, there were



"If we're all just energy, then why don't I have any?"

almost two million Iraqis living as refugees outside their country—most of them in Syria and Jordan. American policy held that these Iraqis were not refugees, that they would go back to their country as soon as it was stabilized. The U.S. Embassies in Damascus and Amman continued to turn down almost all visa applications from Iraqis. So the fastest-growing refugee crisis in the world remained hidden, receiving little attention other than in a few reports from organizations like Human Rights Watch and Refugees International.

Then, in early January, U.N.H.C.R. sent out an appeal for sixty million dollars for the support and eventual resettlement of Iraqi refugees. On January 16th, the Senate Judiciary Committee's subcommittee on refugees, chaired by Senator Edward M. Kennedy, of Massachusetts, held hearings on Iraqi refugees, with a special focus on Iraqis who had worked for the U.S. government. Pressure in Congress and the media began to build, and the Administration scrambled to respond. When an Iraqi employee of the Embassy was killed on January 11th, and one from U.S.A.I.D. on February 14th, statements of condolence were sent out by Ambassador Khalilzad and the chief administrator of U.S.A.I.D.—gestures that few could remember happening before.

In early February, the State Department announced the formation of a task force to deal with the problem of Iraqi refugees. A colleague of Kirk Johnson's at U.S.A.I.D., who had been skeptical that Johnson's efforts would achieve anything, wrote to him, "Interesting what a snowball rolled down a hill can cause. This is your baby. Good going." On February 14th, at a press conference at the State Department, members of the task force declared a new policy: the United States would fund eighteen million dollars of the U.N.H.C.R. appeal, and it would "plan to process expeditiously some seven thousand Iraqi refugee referrals," which meant that two or three thousand Iraqis might be admitted to the U.S. by the end of the fiscal year. Finally, the Administration would seek legislation to create a special immigrant visa for Iraqis who had worked for the U.S. Embassy.

During the briefing, Ellen Sauerbrey, the Assistant Secretary of State for Population, Refugees, and Migration, insisted, "There was really nothing that was indicating there was any significant issue in terms of outflow until—I would say the first real indication began to reach us three or four months ago." Speaking of Iraqi employees, she added, "The numbers of those that have actually been seeking either movement out of the country or requesting assistance have been—our own Embassy has said it is a very small number." Sauerbrey put it at less than fifty.

The excuses were unconvincing, but the stirrings of action were encouraging. When Johnson, wearing the only suit he owned, took his list to Washington and dropped it off at the State Department and the U.N.H.C.R. office, the response was welcoming. But he pressed officials for details on the fates of specific individuals: Would Yaghdan be able to register as a refugee in Dubai, where there was no U.N.H.C.R. office, before he was forced to go back to Iraq? How could Ibrahim, trapped in Egypt without legal travel documents, qualify for a visa before his brain tumor killed him? Would Iraqis who had paid ransom to kidnappers be barred entry under the "material support" clause of the Patriot Act? (One Embassy employee already had been.) How would Iraqis who had no Kirk Johnson to help them—the military interpreters, the Embassy staff, the contractors, the drivers—be able to sign up as refugees or candidates for special immigrant visas? Would the U.S. government seek them out? Would they have to flee the country and find a U.N.H.C.R. office first?

Thanks in part to Johnson's list, Washington was paying attention. Privately, though, a former U.S.A.I.D. colleague told Johnson that his actions would send the message "that it's game over" in Iraq, and America would end up with a million and a half asylum seekers. Johnson feared that the ingrained habit of giving yes/no answers might lower the pressure without solving the problem. His list kept growing after he had delivered it to the U.S. government, and the desperation of those already on it grew as well. By mid-March, Iraqis on the list still had no mechanism for applying to immigrate. According to the State Department, a humanitarian visa for Ibrahim would take up to six months. And Yaghdan's situation was just as dire now as it was when Johnson had written his op-ed. "No matter what is said by the Administration, if Yaghdan isn't being helped, then the government is not responding," Johnson told me.

For him, it was a simple matter. "This is the brink right now, where our partners over there are running for their lives," he said. "I defy anyone to give me the counter-argument for why we shouldn't let these people in." He quoted something that President Gerald Ford once said about his decision to admit a hundred and thirty thousand Vietnamese after the fall of Saigon: "To do less would have added moral shame to humiliation."

EVACUATION

In 2005, Al Jazeera aired a typically heavy-handed piece about the American evacuation from Saigon, in April, 1975, rebroadcasting the famous footage of children and old people being pushed back by marines from the Embassy gates, and kicked or punched as they tried to climb onto helicopters. The message for Iraqis working with Americans was clear, and when some of those who worked at U.S.A.I.D. saw the program they were horrified. The next day at work, a small group of them met to talk about it. "Al Jazeera has their own propaganda. Don't believe it," said Ibrahim, the Iraqi who is now hiding out in Cairo.

Hussein, the go-between in southern Iraq, had also begun to think about Vietnam. He had heard that America had left the Vietnamese behind, but he couldn't believe that the same thing would happen in Iraq. "We might be given a good chance to leave with them," he said. "I think about that, because history is telling me that they always have a moral obligation." To Hussein, the obligation was mutual, because he still felt indebted to the Americans for his freedom. I asked him what he would do if he found himself abandoned. Hussein thought about it, then said, "If I reach this point, and I am still alive when I see moral obligation taking the incorrect course, I will say, 'I paid my debt. I am free.' "

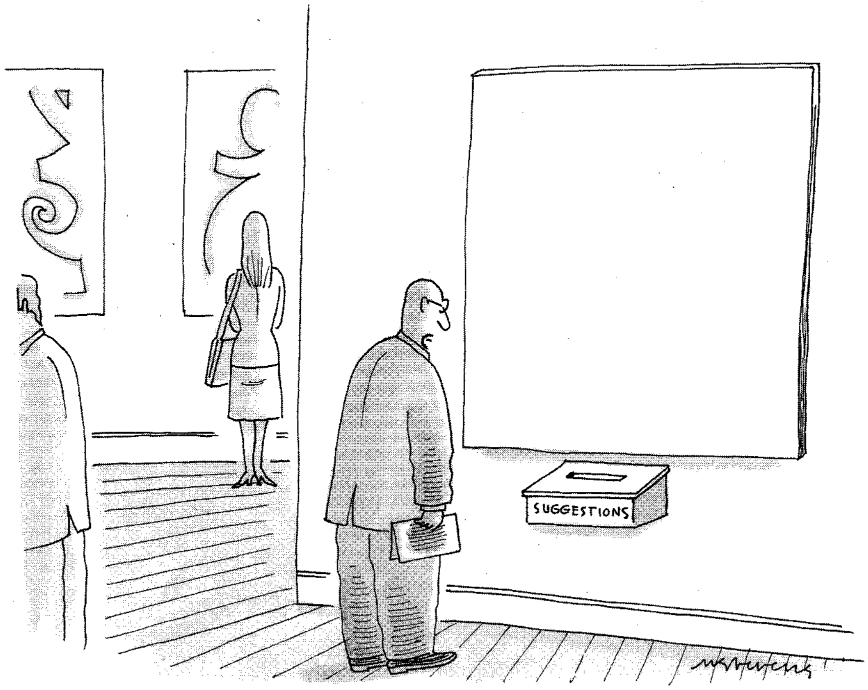
At the end of the Vietnam War, Frank Snepp was the C.I.A.'s chief analyst at the American Embassy in Saigon. His 1977 book about the last days of the Vietnam War, "Decent Interval," describes how the willful ignorance and political illusions of top U.S. officials prevented any serious planning for an evacuation of America's Vietnamese allies. Thousands were left to the mercy of the Communists. The book contains a photograph of the author, thirty-one at the time, standing on the bridge of the U.S.S. Denver in the South China Sea, three days after being evacuated from Saigon by helicopter. He is leaning against the rail, his tan, handsome face drawn taut as he stares slightly downward. Recently, I asked Snepp what he had been thinking when the picture was taken.

"I was overwhelmed with guilt," he said. "I kept hearing the voices on the C.I.A. radios of our agents in the field, our Vietnamese friends we wouldn't be able to rescue. And I had to understand how I had been made a party to this. I had been brought up in the Old South, in a chivalric tradition that comes out of the Civil War—you do not abandon your own. And that's exactly what I had done. It hasn't left me to this day."

No conquering enemy army is days away from taking Baghdad; the city is slowly breaking up into smaller, isolated enclaves, and America's Iraqi allies are being executed one by one. It's hard to imagine the American presence in Iraq ending with a dramatic helo lift from a Green Zone landing pad. But, in some ways, the unlikelihood of a spectacularly conclusive finale makes the situation of the Iraqis more perilous than that of the South Vietnamese. It's easier for the U.S. government to leave them to their fate while telling itself that "the good Iraqis" are needed to build the new Iraq.

American institutions in Vietnam were just as unresponsive as they are in Iraq, but, on an individual level, Americans did far more to evacuate their Vietnamese counterparts. In Saigon they had girlfriends, wives, friends, whereas Americans and Iraqis have established only work relationships, which end when the Americans rotate out after six months or a year. In the wide-open atmosphere of Saigon, many officials, including Snepp, broke rules or risked their lives to save people close to them. Americans in Baghdad don't have such discipline problems. A former Embassy official pointed out that cell phones and e-mail connect officials in Iraq to their bosses there or in Washington around the clock. "When you can always connect, you can always pass the buck," he said. For all their technology, the Americans in Baghdad know far less about the Iraqis than those in Saigon knew about the Vietnamese. "Intelligence is the first key to empathy," Snepp said.

I asked Snepp what he would say to Americans in Iraq today. "If they want to keep their conscience clean, they better start making lists of people they must help," he said. "They should also not be cautious in questioning their superiors,



and that's a very hard thing to do in a rigid environment."

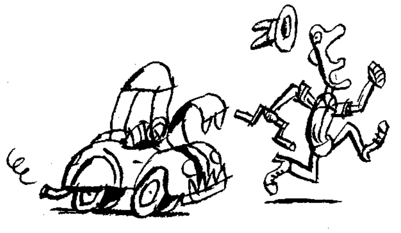
Richard Armitage, who was Deputy Secretary of State under Colin Powell during the first years of the Iraq war, served as a naval officer in Vietnam. In the last days of that war, he returned as a civilian, on a mission to destroy military assets before they fell into North Vietnamese hands. He arrived too late, and instead turned his energy to the evacuation of South Vietnamese sailors and their families. Armitage led a convoy of barely seaworthy boats, carrying twenty thousand people, a thousand miles across the South China Sea to Manila—the first stop on their journey to the United States.

When I met Armitage recently, at his office in Arlington, Virginia, he was not confident that Iraqis would be similarly resettled. "I guarantee you no one's thinking about it now, because it's so fatalistic and you'd be considered sort of a traitor to the President's policy," he said. "I don't see us taking them in this time, because, notwithstanding what we may owe people, you're not going to bring in large numbers of Arabs to the United States, given the fact that for the last six years the President has scared the pants off the American public with fears of Islamic terrorism."

Even at this stage of the war, Armitage said, officials at the White House retain an "agnosticism about the size of the problem." He added, "The President believes so firmly that he is President for just this mission—and there's something religious about it—that it will succeed, and that kind of permeates. I just take him at his word these days. I think it's very improbable that he'll be successful."

I was in Baghdad when the Administration announced its new security plan—including an effort to stabilize Baghdad with a "surge" of twenty thousand additional troops. I spent a day with Lieutenant Colonel Steven Miska, who commands a small American base surrounded by a large Iraqi one in the old-line Shia district of Kadhimiya. Everywhere we went, Iraqi civilians asked him when the surge would begin. Two dozen men hanging out at a sidewalk tea shop seemed to have the new strategy confused with the Iraq Study Group Report; I took the mix-up to mean that they were desperate for any possible solution. A Shia potentate named Sheikh Muhammad Baqr gave me his version of the new plan over lunch at his house: the Americans were trying to separate the ten per cent of the population that belonged to extremist militias—whether Shia or Sunni—from what he called the "silent majority." If families evicted from mixed areas could be convinced to return to their homes, and if unemployed young men could be put to work, the plan had a chance of restoring confidence in the Americans. The Sheikh warned, "In six months you will have to see this plan work, or else the Iraqi people will tell the Americans to find another venue." The Sheikh had even less faith in the government of Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki, which he called a collection of "sectarian movements" brought to power by American folly. "We don't need democracy," he said. "We need General Pinochet in Chile or General Franco in Spain. After they clear the country, we'll have elections."

Lieutenant Colonel Miska, for his part, described the security plan as an attempt to get Americans off the big bases and into Iraqi neighborhoods, where they would occupy small combat outposts on the fault lines of sectarian conflicts and, for the first time, make the protection of civilians a central goal. The new plan represented a repudiation of the strategy that the Administration had pursued for the past two years—the handover of responsibility to Iraqi security forces as Americans pulled out of the cities. President Bush had chosen a new commander in Iraq, General David Petraeus, who recently oversaw the writing of the Army and Marine Corps's new counter-insurgency manual. Petraeus has surrounded himself with a brain trust of counter-insurgency experts: Colonel H. R. McMaster, who two years ago executed a nearly identical strategy in the northern city of Tal Afar; Colonel Peter Mansoor; and David Kilcullen, an Australian strategist working at the State Department. Bush named Timothy Carney, a retired ambassador, to be his reconstruction czar in Iraq; Carney had left the Coalition Provisional Authority in disgust after seeing Bremer make mistake after mistake. After four years of displaying resolve while the war was being lost, the President has turned things over to a group of soldiers and civilians who have been steadfast critics of his strategy. It is almost certainly too late.



In Baghdad, among Iraqi civilians and American soldiers, it's impossible not to want to give the new strategy a try. The alternative, as Iraqis constantly point out, is a much greater catastrophe. "I'm still hoping Bush's new plan can do something," Othman told me. In the weeks after the surge was announced, there were anecdotal reports of Shia and Sunni families returning to their homes. But even if this tentative progress continues, three major obstacles remain. The first is the breakdown of U.S. ground forces, in manpower and equipment; it isn't clear that the strategy can be sustained for more than six months—nowhere near enough time to repair the physical and social destruction of Baghdad.

The second obstacle was described to me by an international official who has spent the past three years in Iraq. "The success of the American strategy is based on a premise that is fundamentally flawed," he said. "The premise is that the U.S. and Iraqi governments are working toward the same goal. It's simply not the case." Shia politicians, the official said, want "to hold on to their majority as long as they can." Their interest isn't democracy but power. Meanwhile, Sunni politicians want "to say no to everything," the official said; the insurgency is politically intractable.

Finally, there is the collapse of political support at home. Most Americans have lost faith in the leadership and conduct of the war, and they want to be rid of it. More important than all the maneuverings in Congress, at the White House, and among the Presidential candidates is the fact that nobody wants to deal with Iraq anymore. The columnist Charles Krauthammer, the most ardent of neoconservative hawks, has found someone to blame for the war's failure:

the Iraqis. He recently wrote, "We midwifed their freedom. They chose civil war." John Edwards, the Democratic Presidential candidate, is also tired of Iraqis. "We've done our part, and now it's time for them to step up to the plate," he recently told this magazine. "When they're doing it to each other, and America's not there and not fomenting the situation, I think the odds are better of the place stabilizing." America is pulling away from Iraq in the fitful, irritable manner of someone trying to wake up from an unpleasant sleep. On my last day in Baghdad, I had lunch with an Embassy official, and as we were leaving the restaurant he suddenly said, "Do you think this is all going to seem like a dream? Is it just going to be a fever dream that we'll wake up from and say, 'We got into this crazy war, but now it's over and we never have to think about Iraq again'?" If so, part of our legacy will be thousands of Iraqis who, because they joined the American effort, can no longer live in their own country.

"You say 'meek,' but your records say 'passive-aggressive.'"

• •

Othman and Laith are still in Baghdad. Earlier this month, Othman spent more than two thousand dollars on passports for his mother, his two younger brothers, and himself. He is hoping to move the family to Syria. Laith wants to find a job in Kurdistan.

Firas, Ali, and Ahmed are now in Sweden. All three of them would have preferred to go to America. Ali had spent his childhood in the United States; Ahmed was fascinated with American politics; Firas never felt more at home than he had on their training trip, listening to jazz in Greenwich Village. Like all Iraqis who worked with Americans, they spoke in American accents, using American idioms. Ahmed delighted in using phrases like "from the horse's mouth" and "hung out to dry."

I asked Firas why he hadn't tried to get a visa to the United States. "And what would I do with it?" he said.

"Ask for asylum."

"Do you think they would give me an asylum in the U.S.? Never."

"Why?"

"For the U.S. to give an asylum for an Iraqi, it means they have failed in Iraq."

This wasn't entirely true. Recently, Iraqis who made it to America have begun filing petitions for asylum, and, because they undoubtedly face a reasonable fear of harm back home, a few of them have been accepted. A much larger number of Iraqis are still waiting to learn their fates: U.S.A.I.D. employees who jumped ship on training trips to Washington; Fulbright scholars who have been informed by the State Department that they have to go back to Iraq after their two- or three-year scholarships end, even if a job or another degree program is available to them in America. The U.S. government, for which Firas worked for three and a half years, had given him ample reason to believe that he could never become an American. Still, if he had somehow made it here, there is a chance that he could have stayed.

Instead, he is trying to become a Swede. I met him one recent winter morning in Malmö, a city of eighteenth-century storefronts and modern industrial decay at the southern tip of Sweden, just across the Öresund Strait from Copenhagen. He was waiting to hear the result of his asylum petition while living with Ahmed in a refugee apartment block that was rapidly filling up with Iraqis. Since the war began, nearly twenty thousand Iraqis had arrived in the country. Firas was granted asylum in February.

Sweden amazed Firas: the silence of passengers on trains; the intolerance for smoking; the motorists that wait for you to cross the street, as if they were trying to embarrass you with courtesy. When I joked that he would be bored living here, he laughed grimly and said, "Good. I want to be like other people—normal. How long before I can be afraid or shocked? There is nothing that makes me afraid or shocked anymore."

We walked from the train station to the Turning Torso, a new apartment tower, designed by Santiago Calatrava, that twists ninety degrees on its axis as it rises fifty-four stories into the slate-gray sky, and drank Swedish Pilsners at the Torso Bar and Lounge. When the Americans came to Iraq, four years ago, Firas felt that he could finally begin his life. Now, at thirty-five, he was starting over yet again.

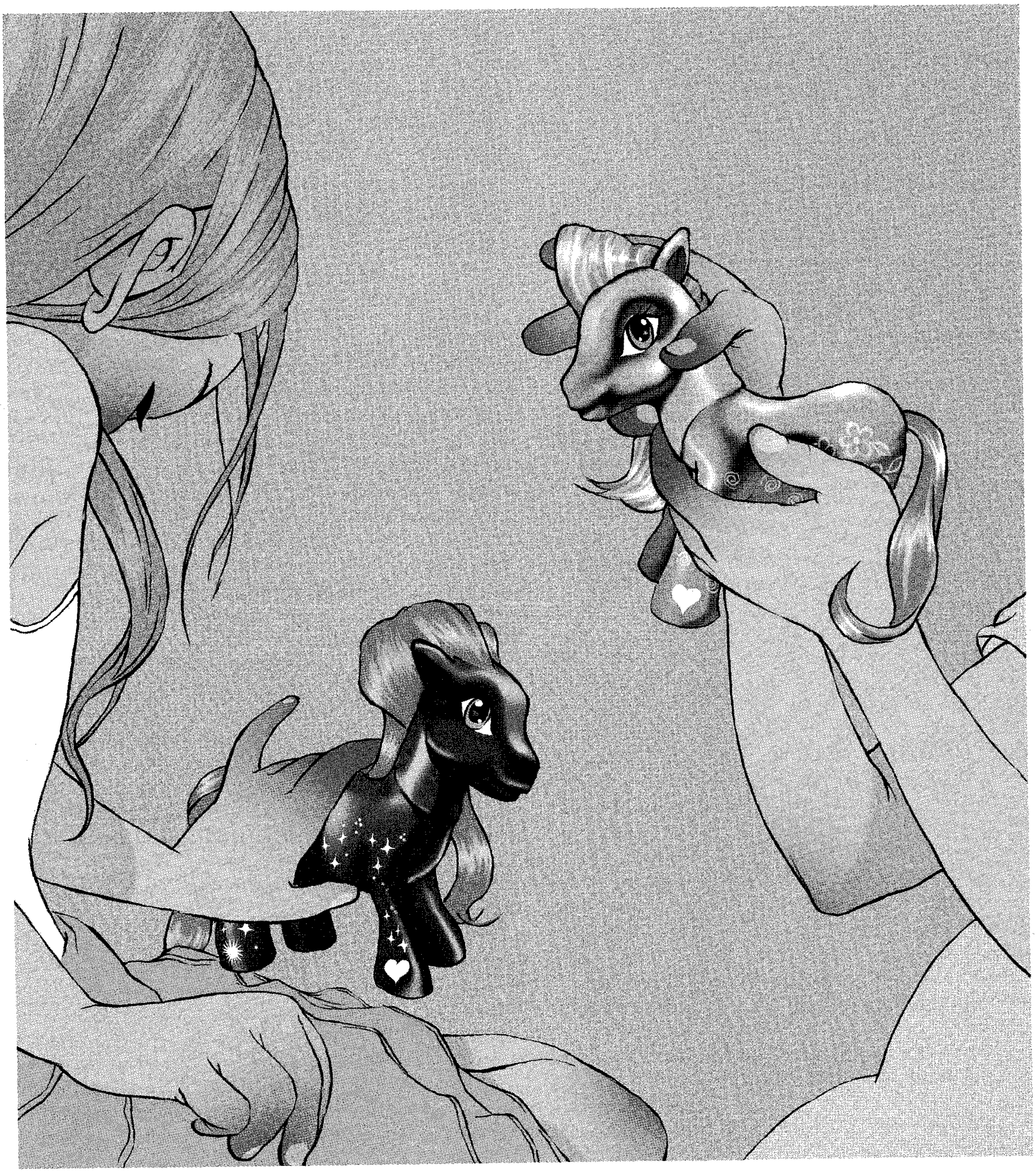
I asked him if he felt betrayed by America.

"I have this nature—I don't expect a lot from people," Firas said. "Not betrayed, no, not disappointed. I can never blame the Americans alone. It's the Iraqis who destroyed their country, with the help of the Americans, under the American eye." I was about to say that he deserved better, but Firas was lost in thought. "To this moment," he said, "I dream about America." ♦

FICTION

PLAYDATE

BY KATE WALBERT



Matilda's mother apologizes for calling so late, but she wonders whether Caroline might be free for a playdate? Like, tomorrow?

"Matilda's had a cancellation," she says.

Liz searches the kitchen drawer for Caroline's Week-at-a-Glance. It's ten already and she's had her wine; down the hall the baby nurse, Lorna, is asleep with the twins and Caroline; Ted's out of town. What the hell is Matilda's mother's name, anyway? Faith, Frankie, Fern—

"We could do an hour," Liz says. "We have piano at four-thirty."

She can picture her clearly: a single woman who hovers in the school hallways wearing the look that Liz has come to associate with certain mothers—a mixture of doe-eyed expectancy and absolute terror, as if at any minute they might be asked to recite the Pledge of Allegiance or the current policy on plagiarism; the school being one of those places where mothers are kept on their toes and organized into various committees for advance and retreat, their children's education understood as a mined battlefield that must be properly assaulted. Didn't she just see her last week at the enlightenment session? A talk given by a Dr. Roberta Friedman, Professor of Something, entitled "Raising a Calm Child in the Age of Anxiety; or, How to Let Go and Lighten Up!" But now, for the life of her, Liz can't remember whether she and Matilda's mother exchanged two words, just the way Matilda's mother balanced on the edge of her folding chair taking notes, the intentional gray streak (intellectual?) of her cropped hair, the fury of her pen.

"Oh, God, that's great," Matilda's mother is saying. "I just need to keep Matilda from losing her gourd."

"I understand," Liz says.

"Do you?" says Matilda's mother. "You do?"

Her name is Fran, apparently. Fran Spalding. Liz has looked her up in the confidential, you-lose-it-you're-screwed Parent & Faculty directory. She and Matilda live across the Park from the school, on West Eighty-sixth Street. Does anyone not live uptown? Liz wants to know, but she asks the question only of herself, so there's no answer, just the relative quiet of her studio—a big loft in what was once considered Chinatown. Liz spends most mornings here spinning clay into pots and teacups and dessert plates. At this hour there's little interruption, just the occasional rumble of a garbage truck and the low chatter of the radio and her own mind: Fran Spalding, daughter Matilda, West Eighty-sixth. They'll go today after school. They'll cross the Park in a taxi, mothers and daughters, and aim for the apartment building, three-forty-something, where Fran Spalding and Matilda live, and go up to the fifteenth floor, 15D, she knows—the address listed in the second section of the directory, the front pages clotted with emergency numbers and please-put-in-a-place-of-prominence evacuation routes.

TOMER HANUKA

It's a playdate, a date for play; Caroline duly apprised of the plan this morning as she and Liz waited for the school bus on Lafayette. Around them, Cooper Union students bunched up like blackflies, bluebottles in window corners, at every "Don't Walk."

"Who?" Caroline says.

"Matilda. She's in your class. You know. She wears striped shirts."

"Does she have a cat?" Caroline asks.

"I have no idea."

"Does she want to play My Little Ponies?"

Liz looks down at her daughter. "Who doesn't?" she says.

Caroline shoves her hands in her pockets and swings one leg. She leans against a filthy meter tattooed with stickers advertising things: 800 numbers for important advice; someone staying positive with H.I.V.

"I'll go," Caroline says, as if going were a question.

"Great!" Liz says. "Here comes the bus!"

The school bus is the big yellow kind, exactly the same as the one Liz once rode to elementary school, in that faraway place, that faraway land known as rural Ohio. Here, in lower Manhattan, the bus seems too large, wrong, a dinosaur lurching through the veering bicyclists and throngs of pedestrians, the construction cones and smoking manholes; a relic of a thing, a dirtied yellow shell, an empty chrysalis whose butterfly has flown the coop. Inside, a handful of children are spread front to back, their expressionless faces gazing out the smeared windows, their ears plugged. Her own school bus, her Ohio school bus, had burst with noise and the boys who wouldn't move over and then, later, would.

The bus stops; its doors open. Liz releases Caroline's hand and waits as she ascends the high steps and disappears down the aisle. In an instant, she reappears in the window seat closest to Liz, her backpack beside her like a twin. Liz waves and smiles; that she has refused to buy headphones and the machines into which they fit remains a constant source of outrage to her daughter, though on this morning Caroline seems happy enough, smiling back, crossing her eyes and sticking out her tongue as the doors close and the school bus lurches on.

"First, the golden rule: Never compare your own childhood experiences with those of your children," Dr. Friedman had said, her glasses pushed to the tip of her nose. "This is a fruitless exercise, unhealthy and counterproductive. Best to remain alert; to look on the bright side; to, whenever possible, accentuate joy."

Liz pounds the clay on the wheel and straightens her miner's cap, a figment of her imagination but one that works relatively well in focussing her thoughts away from the business of children and onto the clay. The twins are presumably in the park with Lorna, sleeping in their double stroller or being pushed, side by side, in the swings meant for babies. Lorna is a pro. She will have bundled them up and thought to bring nourishment—formula or the breast milk that Liz pumps every evening; her breasts have nearly expired, she thinks, they've hit their expiration date. And Caroline is safely in school, repeating the colors of vegetables in Spanish or sitting at a small round table having what's known as Snack: individual packages of Cheez-Its (they've all complained!), or free-of-hydrogenated-oils-and-corn-syrup-though-possibly-manufactured-in-a-factory-traced-with-nuts animal crackers. The point is, Liz has five hours before she needs to take the subway uptown: five whole hours. It is nothing and everything. It could stretch out before her like an eternity if she has the will, or it could evaporate in a single moment.

Concentrate, she thinks.

In the bright light of the cap, Liz sees the spinning clay take form and her own hands, aged, fingernails bitten to the quick. She has written Fran Spalding's cell-phone number across her knuckles, in case she forgets, or there's a problem, or the world blows its cork: a possibility, a probability, apparently, but for now she's going to concentrate. She's not going to think about that.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, this is an important message from the New York City Police Department," says the subway voice over the loudspeaker five hours later. Liz stands half in, half out of the subway car, a new habit; she always waits until the last passengers have pushed past before she fully commits to sitting down.

"Keep your belongings in your sight at all times. Protect yourself. If you see a suspicious package or activity on the platform or train, do not keep it to yourself. Tell a police officer or an M.T.A. employee.

"Remain alert, and have a safe day," the voice adds as the doors shut.

The taxi barrels across Central Park, through its odd scattering of tunnels; blocks of stone rise on either side of the road as if the taxi were plummetting through earth. Above loom the barren trees, leafless and gray, or the blotched white of sycamores; once, aeons ago it seems now, orange flags were unfurled along this same route. Then, thousands of people, all of them vaguely smiling, had wandered the paths like pilgrims in a dream. No one appears to be smiling now. They hurry along, wrapped in their coats, the day leaden, darkening; an Ethan Frome day, Liz used to say in college, to be clever, though she wasn't particularly, unable to decipher the strange manners and customs of the East. She hasn't thought of that in years.

Fran pays the driver, while Liz, in back, unbuckles Caroline and Matilda, leaning over them to push open the door. "On the curb," she's saying. "Watch your step," she's saying. "Grab your gloves." Fran gestures for them to follow her into the building entrance, where two men in uniform hold open the large glass doors, bowing slightly as Fran passes.

"Partner!" one of them says, high-fiving Matilda. "Who's your buddy?"

"Michael," Fran says, arrested at the "WELCOME" threshold. "This is Matilda's friend Carolyn."

"Caro*line*," Liz says; she can't help it, raw nerve. Anything else she would let slide, she tells herself. Truly.

"Of course," Fran is saying. "Caroline."

"Buddy bear," Michael says to Matilda. "Look at you."

They look. How can they not? Everywhere there are mirrors, reflecting them, reflecting Michael and the other guy, reflecting the bounty and the grandeur of it all—potted green plants with white lights, garlands, a cone of poinsettia and even, on a pedestal between the elevator banks, an elaborately carved stone urn containing—what? Liz wonders. Dead tenants?

"This is lovely," Liz says.

"It's home," Fran says. She rings for the elevator, the girls crowding next to her. In an instant there's the *ping*, and then the doors slide open. Another man in uniform smiles as they all step in; there is a small chair in the corner for sitting, though he clearly prefers to stand.

"Hey, Matty," he says. "How's the Go-Go?"

Go-Go, Fran explains, is the cat, their cat, who recently contracted a hot spot. A hot spot, she tells Liz, is an itch that can't be scratched.

"Wow," Liz says.

They rise in mechanical wonder and then stop, abruptly, on eleven, where the elevator doors slide open to no one.

"False alarm," the man in the uniform says, releasing the doors and driving them onward, upward. The girls stand stock still; they all stand stock still.

"Are you allergic?" Matilda says to Caroline.

"The cat," Fran says to Caroline.

"Are you allergic to cats?" Matilda says. She wears pink plastic barrettes and a striped shirt underneath a pink jumper.

"Caroline," Liz says. "Did you hear—"

"No," Caroline says. She hunches beneath her huge backpack, carried solely for fashion, or just in case. In it now, Liz happens to know, is a palm-size notepad on which Caroline draws the details of her day and a purple-lipsticked Bratz doll that she treasures, received on her last birthday from Ted's mother, who, Ted said, meant well.

"Lots of people are," Matilda says.

The elevator stops.

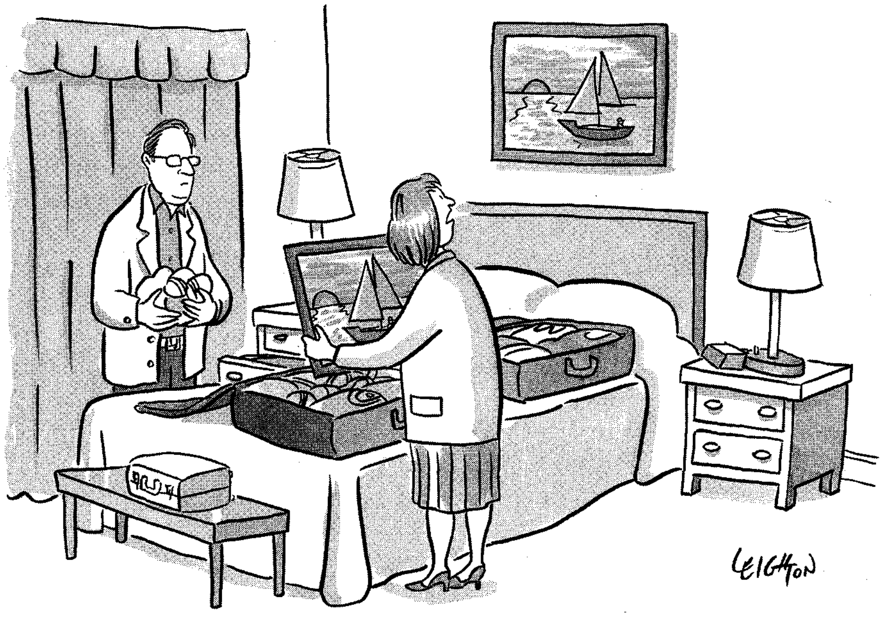
"North Pole," says the man in the uniform.

"Thank you," says Fran.

"Thank you," says Liz.

"Thank you," says Matilda.

"Thank you," says Caroline, walking behind Liz and tripping her, accidentally on purpose. "Caroline," Fran's voice soars in from ahead. "How do you feel about strudel?" But neither Caroline nor Matilda is listening, or hungry, for that matter; released from the grip of the elevator, the girls run down the poorly lit hallway playing some sort of imaginary game, knocking into doors and taking corners at high speed.



"You were right—they've got one at the hotel."

"Matilda Beth," Fran yells after them. "That's one." She pauses. "Don't let me get to two."

Matilda stops and grabs Caroline's hand, pulling her toward what must be D—an unassuming door with a child's drawing taped over its peephole. It is always the same, Liz thinks, in these pictures: the mismatched ears, the round eyes, the name scrawled across one corner. The girls are six years old and braided, the days of the week stitched on their underpants. They wear seamless socks and rubber-soled shoes, and both are missing two teeth, though not the same ones; each has been read "Charlotte's Web" and "The Boxcar Children," the first a story of a pig on a farm and its friendship with a spider, the second a story of children, orphans, living happily alone in the woods, making do with rusted spoons pulled from the dump and the occasional cracked cup of milk.

"Caroline," Liz says. "Is this a gold-star day?" She has spied Caroline twisting her finger up her nose and refers to a deal between the two that sometimes results in better behavior but more often does not.

Once in the apartment, Matilda leads Caroline to her room, where they settle beneath a green canopy of gauze to play My Little Ponies. Liz returns to the living room with Fran, whose gray streak, she learns, is natural and who works at home during school hours, copy editing and proofreading documents for a legal firm. From time to time, the girls interrupt them, flying into the living room in leotards and ballerina skirts and, once, in nothing at all, at which point Fran calls Matilda aside and speaks to her in a voice that Liz has heard only from single mothers or from mothers with numerous children—women who simply do not have the time or the patience for the monkey business that everyone else puts up with, they have told her; once, even, she heard the voice from a mother who said she just placed herself in the hands of Jesus. So maybe it's the voice of Jesus, Liz thinks now, admiring it; her own, she knows, entirely lacks authority, as if she were questioning each verdict she pronounced.

"More tea?" Fran asks.

"Thank you," Liz says, following her back into the kitchen, where they wait with great anticipation for the water to boil, watching the kettle's curved spout, its shiny, smudged lid, as if they had never seen anything quite so fascinating in their lives.

"We are living in the Age of Anxiety," Dr. Friedman said, "and here we sit at the epicenter, the Ground Zero, if you will." She looked up and over those glasses at all of them, the throng of mothers, the few stay-at-home dads or those fathers whose schedules allowed them to be flexible—men in T-shirts, shorts, and sturdy boots, their hairy legs oddly comforting, as if, at a moment's notice, they could sweep the whole group onto their shoulders and hoist them out the window. Many of the women in the circle appeared to Liz to be close to tears, though some were more difficult to read, writing with expensive pens, their briefcases balanced against their slim ankles, their hair blown smooth. Dr. Friedman surveyed the room, clearly attempting to make eye contact with the closest suspect, though unfortunately that suspect was Janey Filch, wall-eyed and so shy she looked ready to faint.

"Everywhere we go are reminders of where we are. I don't think they need to be chronicled here. The school has briefed you on contingencies, and your emergency-contact cards have been filed in triplicate. Each child has an individual first-aid kit and a protective mask.

"Still and still, you might say, the question remains: What can you do right now, on this day, at this hour, in this moment?"

Here Dr. Friedman looked up again and smiled, the smile so studied as to be disarming, as if Liz weren't really looking at a woman smiling but at a portrait of a woman smiling.

"Take a deep breath," she said, exhaling loudly. "Smell the roses," she said, inhaling loudly. "Relax."

The women slouched a bit in their folding chairs, attempting to follow Dr. Friedman's advice. Liz imagined that if Dr. Friedman were next to suggest that they all stand and do a few jumping jacks, most would leap to the job.

"Now," Dr. Friedman said, wiggling her shoulders. "I'm going to give you all some homework. This is an exercise that I've found works very well with my patients. It's simple, really. How many of you keep a journal?"

A few hands shot up, Marsha Neuberger waving as if desperate to be picked.

"That's fine, that's fine," Dr. Friedman said. "I only wanted to get an idea. Anyway, what I'm going to suggest is that you all try keeping what I call an anxiety journal; just like if any of you have ever tried to diet and kept a food journal—"

Anxiety journal like food journal, Liz would have written in her notes, if she had remembered paper and pen. Bemused laughter, she would have added.

"—where you wrote down your caloric intake. Your anxiety journal will be the place where you write down everything that makes you feel nervous, or anxious, throughout the day: it can be anything you like. Don't worry about how it sounds. No one is going to read it but you." This Dr. Friedman said emphatically, Liz would have noted, whipping off her glasses and looking up, avoiding Janey Filch but generally trying to reassure each and every one of them.

"Promise," she added.

Liz looks from her steaming tea to Fran. Fran is describing her terrific luck in finding the apartment, falling into it, desperate, after fleeing San Francisco with Matilda and a few pieces of luggage. Now, as a single mother, she kept a tight rein on things, she said. "Have you noticed?"

Liz is unsure whether she should have noticed or not, so she blows on her tea and shakes her head.

"There was a burglary," Fran says. "In San Francisco. After that we felt like we had to get out. I mean, I did. I left Matilda's father. Richard. And moved back East."

"Oh."

"Strudel?" Fran says, sliding a plate across the counter.

"Oh, gosh, no thanks."

"I've sliced some apples for the girls."

"Great," Liz says, knowing that Caroline won't touch them—the edges, minutes after being sliced, too brown.

"And you?" Fran says.

"I'm sorry?"

"What about you?" Fran says.

"Oh," Liz says. "We moved from Boston. We were in art school, Ted and

I, and then we moved here—Ted works in television, children's television—and then we had Caroline and now the twins, but I'm getting back to it. Art. I'm a potter, actually. I work with clay."

"In vitro?" asks Fran.

"I'm sorry?"

"The twins," Fran says. "In vitro?"

Liz nods.

"Your eggs?"

Liz blows on her tea. "Nope. We had to shell out twenty thousand dollars; we did it through the alumni association."

"Smart eggs," Fran says.

"I didn't really care. Ted felt strongly about that, you know. He didn't want to adopt."

"Men rarely do."

They sit in the living room, on opposite sides of the sectional.

"I think our girls really get along," Fran says.

"Yes," Liz says.

"After the burglary, you know, Matilda had trouble making friends. I mean, she played by herself most of the time. Made up stories. I'd take her to a birthday party or something, and there all the other children would be running around and screaming and playing tag or smacking the piñata, that kind of thing, and Matilda would be sitting by herself involved in some fairy-tale game. It was, well, embarrassing, frankly."

Liz can't help thinking that taupe is entirely the wrong color for this room, high as they are above the city. Excellent light, the listing would say. Light and air; airy light; sun-drenched, sun-gorged, sun-soaked, rush to your sun-kissed oasis! There are windows everywhere, and those radiators that line the walls. Fran should clear them off and paint the place—something dramatic, terra cotta, she'd suggest, or saffron yellow.

"This was in San Francisco, where everything is, well, healthy, do you know what I mean? There's always someone talking about loving-kindness. I couldn't stand it after a while. I just left. I mean, we did; after the burglary. We just got on a plane and flew away. Anyway, that's it. I'm here for good. I mean, I grew up here, in the city, but it's different now, of course. It's a lot different."

There is a bit of a pause; comfortable enough, Liz thinks. The truth is, she's enjoying herself. It's a playdate, she finds herself thinking; I'm on a date for play.

"Would you like a drink?" Fran says.

"A drink?"

"I'd have one if you would. Carpe diem, or whatever. Anyway, screw tea, we're grownups, right?"

"O.K.," Liz says. "Sure. Great. Yes."

"Excellent!" Fran says.

From behind Matilda's door comes a shriek of giggles.

"Besides, they're having fun!" Fran says.

"So are we!" Liz says.

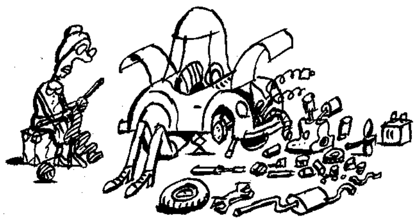
Fran disappears to the kitchen and Liz stands to stretch a bit, to look out the windows. The apartment faces west, she believes, though she gets turned around at these heights. She still isn't used to apartment views or high floors, and the ease with which you can see other lives: how even now, across from here, a boy sits reading at a dining-room table while an old woman—a nurse? a grandmother? a nanny?—moves around him, straightening up, stepping in and then out of Liz's sight. A diorama, they are; what you might see at the American Museum of Natural History: early twenty-first century, N.Y.C., U.S.A. They're dead, actually—stuffed mammals, the old woman on some sort of a moving track.

And what of Fran in the kitchen? Liz in the living room? Urban/suburban women circa 2007 participating in/on playdate, an urban/suburban ritual intended to alleviate boredom/loneliness among children/women while encouraging/controlling social engagement—

"What?" Liz yells.

"Chilled?" Fran yells.

"Wonderful," Liz yells. She turns away from the windows; there are other things to do. She pokes around the taupe room. On a wide bookshelf are the usual histories and paperbacks and framed photographs: an infant Matilda; an earnest-looking boy in mortarboard and gown, Richard?; a teen-age Fran leaning against a giant redwood, her hair not yet streaked with gray but solely black, her posture sophisticated, worldly—she's in college, possibly, or a Manhattan high school. I live on a narrow island, her posture says. I live at the center of the world.



On the secretary are bills and Post-it notepads and loose receipts and whatnot. Liz has a strong feeling, a hot spot, an itch to be scratched, and, sure enough, there it is among them: Fran's anxiety journal. It's as she expected, a steno notebook generally used for reportage. Liz resists for only a moment.

"Voilà!" Fran says. Liz turns to see her carrying a tray, the TV-dinner kind; it makes Liz anxious.

"What have you got?" Fran says. She's pouring and doesn't notice.

"Oh, nothing," says Liz. "Your anxiety journal."

Fran stops. "You were reading it?"

"Oh, God, no. Of course not. I just saw it here and picked it up. I mean, I was thinking, Good for you, and remembering that I've been meaning to buy one, or get one. I'd write, 'TV-dinner tray.' "

"What?"

" 'TV-dinner tray.' Like the one you're holding. It makes me nervous and I can't tell you why."

Fran looks down. "It belonged to Richard. He liked to eat in front of the news."

"Exactly."

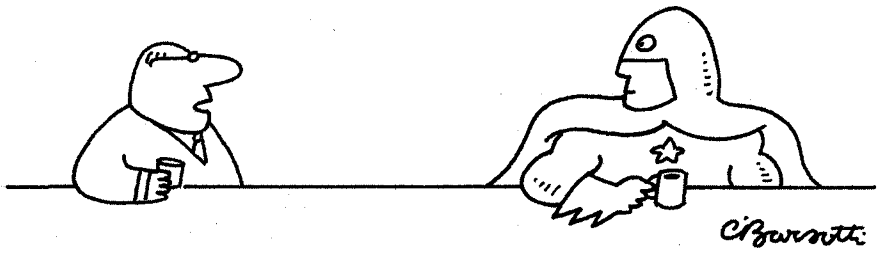
"Maybe it's the news you associate it with."

"Maybe."

"See? She had a point," Fran says. "Cheers!" They toast and sip the wine, which is delicious chilled, Liz says—she never thinks to do that. "You should," Fran says. She takes the anxiety journal and tucks it beneath one of the sectional cushions. "To playdates!" she says, toasting again.

It's near the dinner hour and the girls are getting hungry; they haven't heard a peep from their mothers. Pinkie Pie and Sun Sparkles have been to the castle about a zillion times; they've flown in the blue balloon, late for the costume ball, and then arrived, the "My Little Pony" theme song playing as Pinkie Pie and Sun Sparkles twirl on the special pink plastic revolving disk within the castle walls. Caroline lies on her back, pedalling her legs in the air, her finger working her nose. Matilda is reprimanding her imaginary sister, Beadie.

"Get down from there," Matilda says.



"Some of us are unsung heroes."

Beadie perches dangerously close to the window ledge, threatening to jump, and even though she has wings on her back and little ones at her ankles Matilda pleads with her to stop.

"Goodbye, my friend," Beadie says. "Goodbye!"

Beadie takes a tremendous leap and falls, tumbling, toward the street. Matilda screams an imaginary scream, though Beadie, she knows, won't splat; she'll fly with her little wings right back to Matilda's room. Still, Matilda feels scared.

"Help! Help!" Matilda yells. "Thief! Help! Thief!"

The door swings open.

"Do not even start with that," Fran says. "It makes me insane." Behind Fran, Liz looks in. "Caroline," she says. "Gold-star day, remember?"

Caroline pulls her finger out of her nose.

"Are you girls happy?" Fran says.

"We're hungry," they say.

"We're staying for dinner, how's that!" Liz says.

The girls hop up and down holding hands; they wear only their underwear.

Chicken nuggets are served. Somewhere in Matilda's room, Fran is saying as she prepares the tray, lives a round table and two chairs, Little Bear size, ordered from one of those catalogues which arrive daily in the mail; this one featured three child models, she's saying, two girls and one boy, sipping tea at the table, sunlight streaming through windows that looked out on what appeared to be Russian countryside. The girls were dressed beautifully; the boy served in a monogrammed apron. Or maybe it came from the other one, Fran says, knocking on the door, the one where the child models introduced themselves and listed their goals. "I'm Zelda," Fran says in a wavery falsetto. "I'm going to be a rock star." Fran opens the door; inside, the girls huddle within the gauzy tent, apparently hiding.

"I can't remember which," Fran continues, "but the point is, it's really cute, and it cost a fortune, and it must be here somewhere. I mean, you can't just lose a table and chairs."

Fran wades through stuffed animals and clothes and artwork and books, to a stack of pillows and blankets in the center of Matilda's room, excavating until she finds the ensemble buried beneath. They were making a fort.

"Jesus," she says, flushed. "Can you believe all this crap?"

"Yes," Liz says.

Fran sets down the tray and calls the girls over. "O.K., ladies," she says. "Which princess?"

"Jasmine," Matilda says.

"Oh, for God's sake," Fran says, rotating the plates.

"Ketchup?" Liz says; she holds the bottle at the ready. The girls nod, and she lurches toward them, ready to squirt.

"I can't say that anything really happened with Richard," Fran says. "It was just, you know, the feeling." She lies on the floor in the now dim light of the apartment, balancing her wineglass on her chest, her feet propped on the sectional. "The elephant-in-the-room feeling."

"The wha?" Liz says. She can't remember the last time she drank so much wine in the afternoon; usually, she waits until Caroline's asleep, the twins with Lorna in the nursery, Ted back at the office (the demanding life of a children's-television executive!) before pouring her first glass. Then she might have another, and another, enough to erase the day, or the parts of it she doesn't want to remember: Caroline standing with her backpack on Lafayette, the neon-scrawled windows of the gay bar next to the bus stop, the public-service poster of an unattended bag, like an old-fashioned doctor's bag, shoved beneath some unsuspecting person's seat.

"The elephant-in-the-room feeling," Fran says. "You know, the thing that's just, God, there. It's big and heavy and real, somehow, though unnamed. It's just there, is all, this blob of feeling; the feeling from the Black Lagoon."

Fran rolls over on one elbow. "Did you ever ruin your life for a feeling?" she says.

"I don't know," Liz says. "I hope not." She has closed her eyes to watch the tiny red pricks of light behind her eyelids. It's a trick she likes to do, a habit; she likes to count them, pretend they're sparks. She's combustible, perhaps—she's burning up.

"I miss Richard," Fran is saying. "I miss him every day. There's nobody to tell anything to anymore. Nobody."

Liz opens her eyes and the sparks die out; she is back where she was, things reassembling around her—bookshelf, secretary, radiator, carpet, floor lamps.

"I mean, there never was anybody to talk to, really," Fran is saying. "But there sort of was. I thought there was. For a while I used to. Do you know what I mean?"

"Yes," Liz says, closing one eye and then the other; it changes her perspective. "I think so," she says. She is a highly trained artist, she could tell you. She has training up the wazoo. She got a fellowship, even, and there were many, many applicants. She majored in art history, in case you're interested.

"Do the others look like you?" Fran asks.

"What?" Liz says.

"The twins. Do they look like you? Or, you know, like the smarter, younger egg woman?"

Liz laughs. She doesn't mean to, but she laughs and tips over the wineglass that she forgot she'd balanced beside her. There's just a little left, just a drizzle to darken an already wet spot; she's a well-trained klutz is what she is, a social miscreant fluent in art history, trained in art history. "Sorry, sorry," she says. "I did it again."

"Forget it," Fran says.

Liz blots the wet spot with her shirtsleeve. "Not at all is the thing," she says. "The twins don't look like either of us. They're blond and blue-eyed, for one. I mean, adorable. Absolutely adorably wonderful, but people think they're adopted."

"That's so funny," Fran says.

"I forgot to laugh," Liz says.

"But you're lucky," Fran says.

"God, I know," Liz says. "I am in the ninety-ninth percentile of luck."

"You tested out," Fran says.

"I am among the gifted and talented."

From Matilda's room there's the sound of a thud.

"You guys happy?" Fran yells.

"We're O.K.!" Matilda yells back.

"Caroline?" Liz yells.

"Yes?"

"Are you still there?"

"I'm here," Caroline says.

"I thought she might have disappeared," Liz says. "Sometimes I think she'll just disappear."

"They're fine," Fran says. "More?"

"Just a skosh," Liz says.

"A skosh?" Fran says.

"Japanese for 'a little,' " Liz says. "*Sukoshi.*"

"Oh," Fran says. "Do you speak it?"

"My dad was in the service. Stationed there. I used to think it was Yiddish. He'd say 'Just a skosh' whenever you offered him wine. I miss him, too," Liz says. "Like Richard."

"Your dad?"

"Yes."

"Here." Fran pours; they've finished one bottle and opened another. What they are celebrating they have no idea.

"Lemme at it," Liz says. She crawls along the sectional on all fours. She hasn't been able to locate the floor-lamp switch, but it doesn't matter; she's a cat who can see in the dark. "It was here, I saw it. You took it away from me."

"Oh, God!" Fran shrieks. "The whole thing is so stupid. Please."

"Lemme, lemme, lemme," Liz says.

"You're going to hate me," Fran says.

"Are you kidding?" Liz says. "You're my new best friend."

"You have to promise," Fran says.

"I promise, I promise," Liz says.

"Not to laugh. Really. No. I mean it. Don't laugh. You're going to laugh. I know it. I can just—"

"Bluebird's honor," Liz says. "Bluebird, Brownie, Girl Scout, Kappa Kappa Gamma. God, can you believe me?"

"Wow," Fran says. "Are you serious?"

"I'm always serious," Liz says. "I'm never not serious. I'm a never-not-serious Ohioan, Ohioette gal, aren't I? I remain alert."

"Do you think if we lived there or, like, Montana or something, things would be, I don't know, different?" Fran says.

"Ta-da!" Liz says.

"Shit," Fran says.

"I found it!" Liz says.

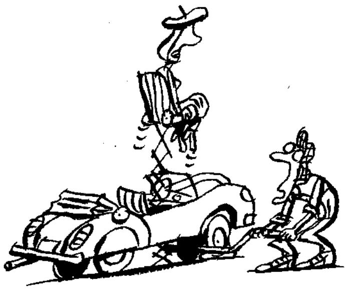
"Shit," Fran says.

"You said I could."

"Go ahead, just please. You promised."

"I'll be dead serious," Liz says. She swings her bare feet around. "I am dead serious," she says. "I am a deadly serious, dead-serious, never-not-serious person. I repeat, I remain alert."

What is she saying? She has no idea, really, though it feels good to speak, the words tumbling out of her mouth and knocking around in the darkening room, high above the city where she has spent the afternoon with a new friend, a sophisticated friend, a woman who grew up here, a woman with a streak of natural gray, a divorced single mother with a legal, razor-sharp mind who can look down on the lights and know where she is, know all the cross streets and the avenues, know the best places to buy things, the best things to buy, a woman who used to bicycle to Greenwich Village, who met Bob Dylan, even, in one of those places where people met Bob Dylan, back when the Village was the Village, and Bob Dylan lived there, or, at least, sang there, but then that would have been Fran's mother, maybe, or an older brother who didn't mind Fran tagging along, who took her even, rode with her balanced on his handlebars.



And now look! This! The promise of the journal in her hands! Fran made notes! She caught all the things that Liz missed—the meeting room overheated and crowded, the acoustics so bad it was impossible to concentrate. And afterward—this is now Liz talking, Liz continuing to talk, Liz babbling—Dr. Friedman had been so mobbed, so impossible to get to, that she had actually waited in the school lobby and followed her out, down Madison and then some, then over, to Lexington, the subway entrance there, Dr. Friedman walking with such robotic—

"What?" Fran says. "What?"

"Robotic," Liz says.

"Oh," Fran says. "Right, robotic. Go on."

—purpose, that she quite literally couldn't catch up. She just couldn't catch up, she says again, before Dr. Friedman flew down the stairs to the subway.

"A flying robot," Fran says.

Liz turns to the journal. "It must be done," she says. "The consensus has been reached."

"O.K.," says Fran, who has moved to sit cross-legged on the floor in front of her.

"It won't hurt," Liz says.

"Please."

"Well, just a little."

"Thank you."

"I'll make it quick," Liz says.

"All right," Fran says.

"These are difficult times, terrible times. Someone's got to police the world."

Liz opens the journal to read, but the truth is, it's difficult to see what's written in the near-dark, and her eyes have started to go. She brings the page to her face, and squints:

(1) Thieves
(2) Crowds
(3) School
(4) Shadows
(5) Playdates
(6) Lunchrooms
(7) Helicopters
(8) Anniversaries
(9) Night

"What?" Fran's saying. "What? Oh, God. What did I write?" She moves closer to Liz, scoots in, so that Liz imagines Fran might next crawl into her lap as Caroline does, settle there between her legs to practice reading in the way she's been instructed at school: Read It

Once to See; Read It Twice to Comprehend; Read It Again to Fully Absorb Its Meaning.

Go-Go appears from nowhere. He scratches and scratches, biting at the hot spot on his leg, gnawing. "Stop!" Fran says, clapping her hands. "Stop!"

Liz closes the journal and stands up a bit unsteadily. "Jesus, it's dark," she says. "I can't believe it got so late." She hands the journal to Fran. "I promised Lorna I'd be back earlier."

"Right," Fran says, taking the journal. "God, I'm sorry."

"Oh, no. This was fun. I mean, this was really fun, and the girls—"

"They seem to hit it off," Fran says.

"Caroline!" Liz yells in the direction of Matilda's room, the shut door. "Shit. We had piano, I totally forgot."

"Oh, my God. I'm really sorry," Fran says. "I started—"

"Don't apologize. Caroline hates piano. Anyway, it wasn't your—are these my shoes?"

"Here," Fran says. "They're here, with Caroline's backpack."

"Caroline!" Liz yells.

"It's impossible to get them—"

"Caroline, now!"

The door opens slowly and the girls, or what looks like shadows of the girls, drift out, fall out, into the hallway.

"Are Thursdays better?" Fran is saying.

"I'm sorry?"

"Thursdays. We could do Thurs—"

Liz feels a kind of draining away, as if the ebb of the twilight has returned to the night all that is loose, unmoored. She has always fought the feeling of this time of day, when her father would remain in the garden and her mother did what mothers did then in the house. Liz would ride her bike up and down the driveway, waiting for her father to call her, to tell her to come quick, to come see the misshapen gourd, or the earthworm, or the potato bug before it got too dark, and she would, before it went black as pitch. She would hurry, she would pedal like the wind to get to what her father held: this thing unknown, random, discovered in the dirt and now there for her in her father's hand. A miracle. It's what placed her squarely in the world, what kept her from being sucked out.

"Yes," Liz says. "Sure, whatever." She ties up Caroline's sneakers, yanks the laces tight. "I'm sorry about Richard," she says, straightening.

"Oh, it's fine," says Fran. "Really. Matilda and I are a team, aren't we, Matty?"

"Rah rah," Liz says.

"Thursdays," Fran says. She has found Caroline's jacket beneath the coat rack and now holds it out for her. "We're going to do Thursdays!" she says to Matilda.

"Let me check at home," Liz says. "I never know which end is up."

"Oh," Fran says.

"Thank Matilda," Liz says to Caroline.

"Thank you," Caroline says.

"Thank Fran," Liz says.

"Thank you," Caroline says.

Liz clutches Caroline's hand on the subway platform. There is work being done somewhere, and the trains are running intermittently, though a taxi or a bus is out of the question—the traffic insane. The twins have had their baths and are sleeping, Liz has heard from Lorna. Everything is fine, she has been told.

"Ladies and Gentlemen," booms the intercom. "This is an important message from the New York City Police Department. Keep your belongings in your sight at all times. Protect yourself. If you see a suspicious—"

"Did you have a good time?" Liz says, talking over the recorded voice, squatting so that she can be at eye level with the girl.

"Uh-huh," Caroline says.

"Is Matilda nice?" Liz says.

"Uh-huh," Caroline says.

"Does she like to play My Little Ponies?" Liz says.

Caroline pulls on the loose straps of her backpack, a filched Pinkie Pie, its tail braided, its eyes pocked by a pen point, now zipped into one of the many compartments.

"I don't know," Caroline says. She turns away from her mother and stares out over the empty tracks. "No," she adds, quietly, though who could hear anything for the screech of the approaching train. In the rush Liz teeters, grabbing Caroline into a hug, her hands gripping Caroline's thin shoulders for balance. "But it was a gold-star day, baby," she says as the crowd swells over them. "Wasn't it?" ♦

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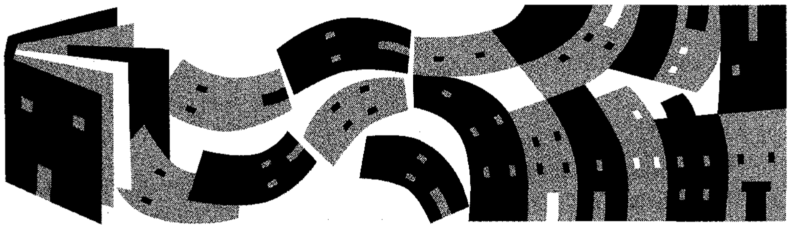


A CRITIC AT LARGE

VAGABONDS

Roberto Bolaño and his fractured masterpiece.

BY DANIEL ZALEWSKI

"And then I never saw him again": this phrase recurs with eerie frequency in the work of the Chilean-born writer Roberto Bolaño, who died four years ago, in Barcelona, at the age of fifty. In Bolaño's ten novels and three story collections—all completed in his torrential final decade, before he succumbed to a chronic liver ailment that he suspected would seal his fate—characters go through life in a state of agitated migration. They sever friendships, quit jobs, abandon apartments without giving notice, skip the return flight home, assume new identities, flee combustive love affairs, cut off ties to everyone they have ever known, head off into the desert, simply disappear. Relationships, in Bolaño's world, tend to be febrile but fleeting, yielding memories suffused by the afterglow of emotion; his narratives are often the testimonies of people the wanderers leave behind. It's no coincidence that Bolaño's most heartbreaking creation—the rebellious, doomed poet at the heart of his 1998 masterwork, "The Savage Detectives," which Farrar, Straus has just published in translation—is named Ulises.

Bolaño, who was born in Santiago in 1953 ("the year that Stalin and Dylan Thomas died," as he noted in an essay), led a life that was itself marked by uprootedness. His father's job was to roam: he was a truck driver. His mother was a teacher. When Bolaño was a child, he and his family shuttled between towns in Chile, and then, in 1968, they moved to Mexico City. Bolaño found the dislocation exhilarating: his new home, he later recalled, was "a vast, almost imaginary place where freedom and metamorphosis were a daily spectacle." By this time, he had developed an appetite for literature so ravenous that it practically outstripped that of his idol, the Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges. Like Borges, Bolaño consumed everything from arcane poetry to dime-store fiction. Unlike Borges, he stole most of his books.

Bolaño, who was dyslexic, didn't enjoy the classroom, and he dropped out of high school, devoting himself to poetry. During the late sixties, mass demonstrations erupted frequently on Mexico City's streets, and Bolaño revelled in the political ferment. He became a Trotskyist and travelled to El Salvador, where he befriended leftist poets who carried guns alongside their notebooks.

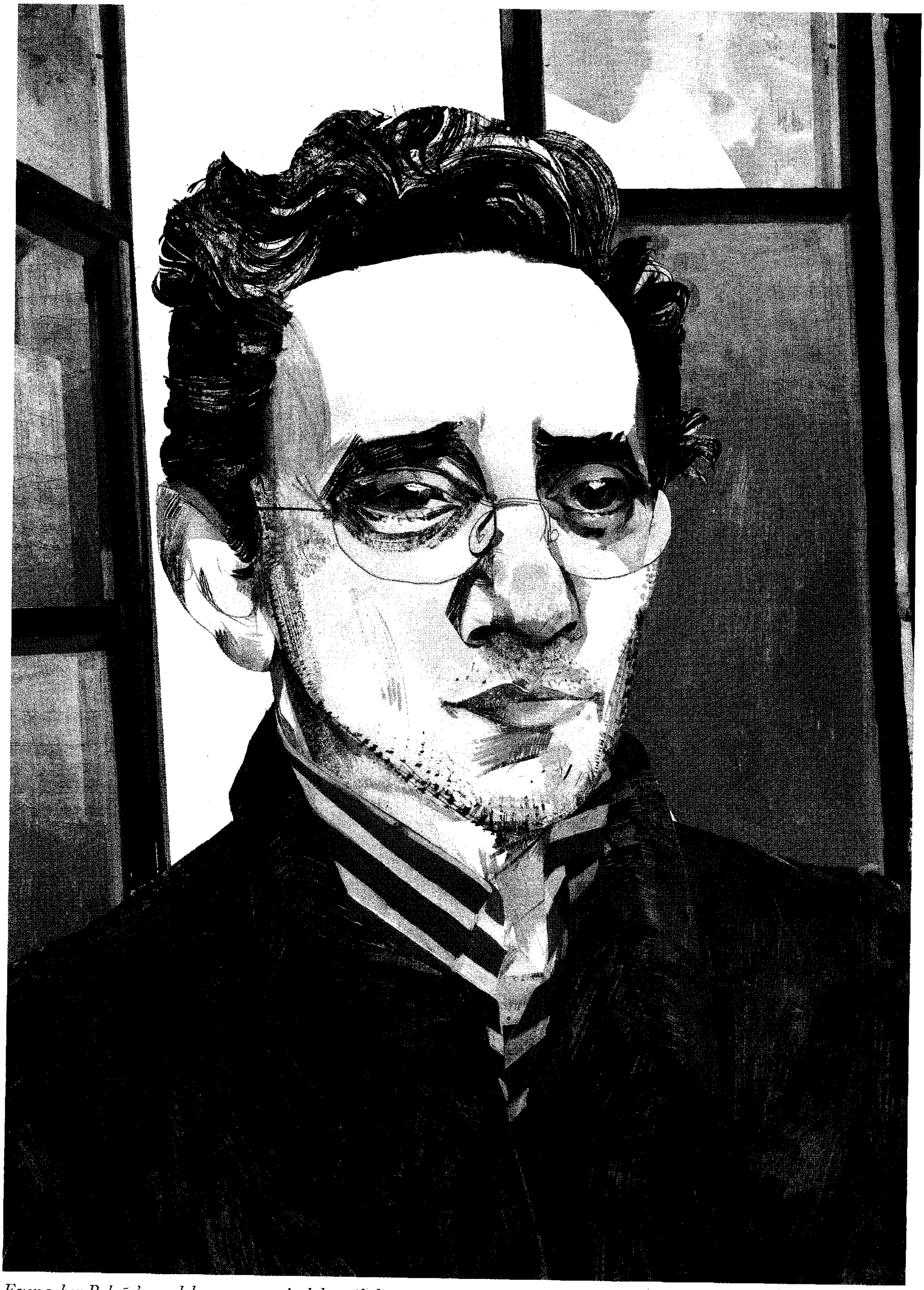
In the summer of 1973, he went back to Santiago, hoping to join a leftist revolution that had taken hold in Chile, with the election of a Socialist government. That September, Augusto Pinochet launched his coup. Bolaño became a spy for the resistance. He was a feeble conspirator—charged with transmitting messages between dissidents, he felt pathetically conspicuous as he bicycled along Santiago's emptied-out streets—but the experience thrilled him. "I recall the days after the coup as rich ones, full of energy, full of eroticism, days and nights in which anything could happen," he once wrote. (Photographs of him from this period show a handsome but malnourished-looking hippie: his wavy black hair was untended, and his delicate eyes were not yet dominated by the ovoid glasses that he adopted in middle age.)

Soon after the coup, Bolaño was stopped at a highway checkpoint. His accent had mutated during his years abroad, and the police booked him as a "foreign terrorist." Bolaño was detained for eight days, and perhaps would have been killed—Pinochet's regime murdered many dissident writers—were it not for a bizarre reversal of the kind that animates his fiction. One day, a prison guard walked up to Bolaño and said, "Don't you remember me? I'm your buddy." The two men had briefly attended high school together; Bolaño was promptly released. After four more months in Chile—a whirl of "black humor, friendship . . . and the danger of death"—Bolaño realized that he had written only one poem, and that it wasn't any good.

He returned to Mexico City in 1974. At a café on Calle Bucareli—Mexico City's Left Bank—Bolaño met Mario Santiago, a defiant, acidly intelligent poet of Indian extraction. The two men, along with a dozen or so friends, formed a band of literary guerrillas, whom Bolaño christened the *infrarealistas*. The group's aesthetic, Bolaño later said, was French Surrealism fused with "Dadaism, Mexican style." They published iconoclastic magazines and engaged in myriad forms of provocation, such as shouting out their own poems at readings given by their "enemies" in Latin America's cultural establishment—in particular, Octavio Paz, the poet who eventually became Mexico's first Nobel Laureate. Another prominent Mexican writer, Carmen Boullosa, has spoken of her "fear," before approaching a lectern, that *infrarealistas* might be lurking in the audience: "They were the terror of the literary world."

Bolaño's fury toward the literary mainstream—deeply felt and bordering on puerile—endured even after his own work became canonical. (At a convocation of writers in Seville, Spain, six weeks before Bolaño died, he was declared to be the most influential Latin-American writer of his generation.) Bolaño is notorious in Spanish-speaking

RICCARDO VECCHIO



Even when Bolaño's work became canonical, he railed against the literary mainstream and its enthusiasm for magic realism.

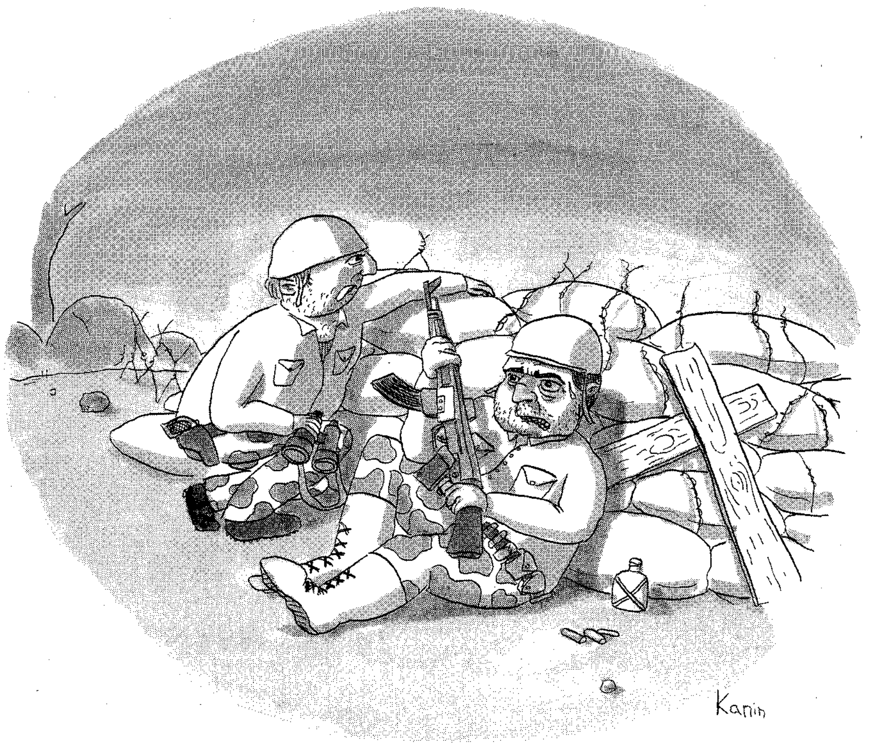
countries for having proclaimed that magic realism "stinks." He derided Gabriel García Márquez as "a man terribly pleased to have hobnobbed with so many Presidents and Archbishops"; he called Isabel Allende a "scribbler" whose "attempts at literature range from kitsch to the pathetic." (Allende, interviewed in 2003, dismissed Bolaño as an "extremely unpleasant" man, adding, "Death does not make you a nicer person.") Bolaño's obstreperousness was sometimes a pose—much like his preference for being photographed in a black leather jacket, sternly sucking on a cigarette—but his self-described "gratuitous attacks" had salutary effects. He helped liberate Latin-American writing from the debased imitations of magic realism that followed the global conquest of García Márquez's 1967 novel "One Hundred Years of Solitude"—all those clairvoyant señoritas and intercourse-inspiring *moles*—and reëstablished the primacy of such cosmopolitan experimentalists as Borges and Julio Cortázar. (For Bolaño, Cortázar's moody novel "Hopscotch" was the Beginning and the End, precisely because it has neither a beginning nor an end.) Of course, some calculation lay behind his position. There was one living Latin-American novelist whose avid bookishness and formal cleverness made him the obvious heir to the modernist tradition: Roberto Bolaño.

Bolaño's fiction is, in large part, an ironic mythologization of his personal history, and "The Savage Detectives" hews closest to what Latin-American writers call the Bolaño legend. The novel, which has been given a bracingly idiomatic translation by Natasha Wimmer, is a teeming, "Manhattan Transfer"-like collage featuring more than fifty narrators, but its first hundred pages are anchored by a single, exuberant voice—that of Juan García Madero, a seventeen-year-old Mexican orphan who, in 1975, abandons his college studies in Mexico City for a group of poet renegades known as the "visceral realists."

Madero's narration comes in the form of clipped, kinetic diary entries: "Depressed all day, but writing and reading like a steam engine"; "I'm reading the dead Mexican poets, my future colleagues." Not since Rimbaud has the world of verse seemed so criminally seductive. Madero's entrance into the poetry underground resembles the heady initiation of Ray Liotta's fledgling mobster in "GoodFellas." The visceral realists not only shoplift (Madero boasts that, in his "tenement room, a little library has already begun to grow from my thefts and visits to bookstores"); they fund a magazine, *Lee Harvey Oswald*, by trafficking in Acapulco Gold marijuana. Yet the purpose of this illicit activity couldn't be purer. "We were all in complete agreement that Mexican poetry must be transformed," Madero proclaims.

The visceral realists are led by Ulises Lima, a confrontational Mexican described by others as a "ticking bomb," and Arturo Belano, a flinty Chilean expatriate who was briefly imprisoned by the Pinochet regime. They literally burst in on Madero's world, interrupting an antiseptic poetry workshop that he attends. (With Madero and Belano, Bolaño, a lover of literary jokes, has managed to squeeze two versions of himself into the same novel.) Lima harangues the professor, and then pulls some "smudged, crumpled sheets from his jacket pocket," reading what Madero calls "the best poem I'd ever heard." Madero, emboldened, hurls insults of his own; after class, Lima and Belano usher him to a "grisly" bar on Calle Bucareli where moll-like waitresses offer blow jobs to aspiring writers, for a price ("I'd like you to write me a poem"). Madero makes the mobster metaphor explicit: "I worried that Belano and Lima were so busy talking to every freak that came up to our table that they'd forgotten all about me, but as day began to dawn, they asked me to join the gang. They didn't say group or movement, they said gang. I liked that." There is an element of parody here: Bolaño appreciates that there is something ridiculous about tough guys who quote Raymond Queneau. Yet, by grafting the tropes of gangster films onto the world of poetry, Bolaño captures the outlaw spirit that pervades every avant-garde movement.

Although the diaries form a kind of bildungsroman, Bolaño never presents Madero's verse, as, say, James Joyce does with Stephen Dedalus in "A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man." The omission is pointed: Bolaño wants to focus on the art of living. Madero's entries have the offhand beauty of raw enthusiasm, particularly when taking account of his rambunctious sex life. Madero loses his virginity to María Font—a feral poet with hands "like the talons of



"I've never seen Mom this angry before."

a falcon”—and goes on a tear from there. He writes of one partner, “She arched as if a ghost were tickling her spine. I came three times. Later we went outside and bathed in the rain spilling over the stairwells.” Of another: “She tasted of cigarettes and expensive food. I tasted of cigarettes and cheap food. But both kinds of food were good.” In Bolaño’s work, vitality is poetry.

As Madero enters the inner circle of visceral realism, he discovers that the movement has a secret history. Lima and Belano have borrowed the group’s name from an equally uncompromising group of poets from the nineteen-twenties; one member, Cesárea Tinajero, particularly fascinates them. Tinajero’s verse was greatly admired by her compatriots, but it cannot be found in libraries. She seems to have vanished decades ago in the Sonora Desert, north of the city. Lima and Belano suspect that she is still alive. Just as the Japanese novelist Haruki Murakami structures his dreamlike narratives around the search for a vanished girl, Bolaño’s fiction repeatedly features a noirish hunt for a missing writer. For Bolaño, whose protagonists are usually poets, the detective plot adds bounce to stories that might otherwise seem leadenly preoccupied with literary matters. The technique echoes that of Borges, whose oracular *ficciones* abound with private eyes.

Madero’s romp through Mexico City ends as Bolaño stories often do—suddenly. A house where the poets gather for a New Year’s Eve party is laid siege to. An armed pimp and his henchman park outside in a Camaro, demanding the return of Lupe, a prostitute—and a friend of María Font’s—who has tendered her resignation from whoring. The poets decide to resolve the standoff by peeling out of the driveway in a friend’s car; they will go to the Sonora Desert, in search of Tinajero. In the first section’s final diary entry, Madero presents a giddy action sequence worthy of “Starsky & Hutch”: “I saw the two thugs get out of the Camaro and I saw them coming at me. . . . I saw that Lupe was looking at me from inside the car and that she was opening the door. I realized that I’d always wanted to leave. I got in and before I could close the door Ulises stepped on the gas.” Poets with their pedal to the metal: *Vroom!* Novelists have been smashing high and low together for a century, but Bolaño does it with the force of a supercollider.

While living in Mexico, Bolaño published two poetry collections, but, in 1977, a failed romance drove him to go abroad. “If I had stayed in Mexico I would have hanged myself,” he said. The infrarealists wilted without him. He spent a year travelling in France, Spain, and North Africa, then settled briefly in Barcelona, taking part in the “great sexual explosion” that convulsed Spain after the death of General Franco. Worried that the city’s allures were distracting him from poetry, he began a long, itinerant tour of the Mediterranean coast, taking on an absurd variety of jobs: grape harvester, dockworker, campground watchman, trinket-shop proprietor. In his spare time, he wrote lush, sentimental poems about his Mexican friends. Around this time, he printed up a visiting card identifying himself as “Roberto Bolaño, Poet and Vagabond.” His wanderings punished his body; he later joked that he left behind a trail of teeth, “like Hansel and Gretel’s bread crumbs.” It didn’t help that he was becoming addicted to heroin.

The second part of “The Savage Detectives” offers a melancholy gloss on Bolaño’s nomadic period. Bolaño, having cut off Madero’s headlong narrative—the hunt for Cesárea Tinajero does not resume for four hundred pages—brings his story to a standstill. In the manner of Faulkner’s hazy oratorio “As I Lay Dying,” he introduces a disorienting array of new narrators: four dozen eyewitnesses, from the United States to Austria to Israel, who report on the wanderings of Lima and of Belano since 1975. (The reason for their exile is a mystery: something terrible seems to have happened in the Sonora Desert.) These accounts, each preceded by a journalistic dateline, resemble extended interviews—and reading them feels like combing through the unedited footage of a documentary. With so many overlapping perspectives, the resulting portraits of Lima and Belano have a Cubist ambiguity. Are the visceral realists ardent visionaries or drugged-out miscreants? It depends on who’s talking. After being immersed in the mind of an acolyte like Madero, readers may be startled by a

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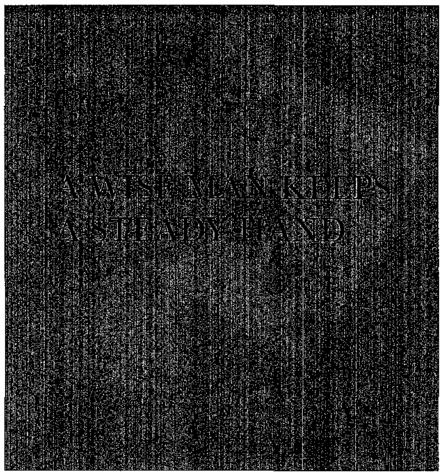

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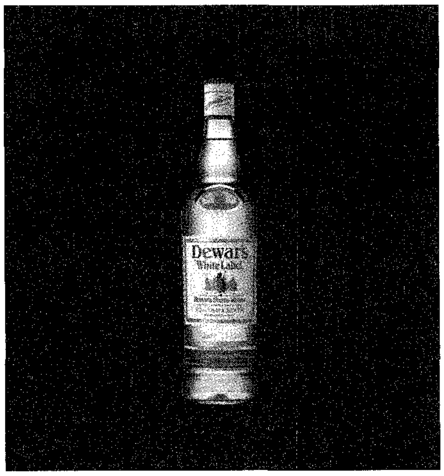

judgment offered by an ex-girlfriend of Belano's: "The whole visceral realism thing was . . . the demented strutting of a dumb bird in the moonlight, something essentially cheap and meaningless." Of Belano, she says, "Deep down the guy was a creep." This is a devilish game to play with an alter ego; Bolaño could have titled this novel "Self-Portrait in Fifty-three Convex Mirrors."

Meanwhile, he gets to inhabit a wild range of narrative voices: a pompous Galician lawyer who calls Belano a "third-rate Julien Sorel"; a foulmouthed gringa who refers to one visceral realist as a "hemorrhoid-licking old bastard." One of the most riveting speakers is Auxilio Lacouture, a garrulous Uruguayan woman who begins with a proclamation: "I'm the mother of Mexican poetry. I know all the poets and all the poets know me." Lacouture, having known Belano since he was a teen-ager, gives the novel's most detailed account of his imprisonment in Chile; in her view, his efforts against the Pinochet regime were noble but tainted him, as he returned to Mexico a preening radical who looked down on his old friends "as if he were Dante and he'd just returned from hell." We also get a weirdly parallel tale of her own travails. Like Belano, who stumbled into the resistance movement against Pinochet, Lacouture was inadvertently trapped by history. In 1968, the National Autonomous University, in Mexico City—where Lacouture did various odd jobs—was overtaken by riot police. Ignoring megaphoned commands to evacuate the campus, Lacouture hid in a bathroom stall, terrified, for several days. (A compulsive poet, she scribbled fresh verse on toilet paper.) She presents her actions as bold protest:

> I lifted my feet like a Renoir ballerina, my underwear dangling around my skinny ankles. . . . And I knew what I had to do. I knew. I knew I had to resist. So I sat on the tiled floor of the women's bathroom and in the last rays of light I read three more poems by Pedro Garfias and then I closed the book and closed my eyes and said to myself: Auxilio Lacouture, citizen of Uruguay, Latin American, poet and traveler, stand your ground.

The incident swallows her up, defining her life: "The legend spread on the winds of Mexico City and the winds of '68, fusing with the stories of the dead and the survivors and now everybody knows that a woman stayed at the university when its freedom was violated." Her monologue edges toward madness. To witness Lacouture's full breakdown, the reader must turn to "Amulet," a slim novel anchored by the same bathroom-stall revelation, which Bolaño published in 1999. (More than once, Bolaño generated entire novels from episodes in earlier ones.) In the end, the fleshed-out portrait of Lacouture in "Amulet"—New Directions recently published a translation—is less potent than the hypnotic ten-page cadenza in "Detectives," which is enriched by its connection to other tales of political confusion.

The most haunting figure in "The Savage Detectives" is Ulises Lima. Upon leaving Mexico, the once fearless poet becomes an aimless "shadowy figure," a "goddamn robot"; in this novel, exile offers not opportunity but enervation. When his forlorn odyssey is complete, Lima—having published nothing, his poems scrawled in the margins of books—returns home. He finally comes face to face with the despised Octavio Paz, who sits next to him on a park bench. The enemy, at last, within reach! But it's soon humiliatingly clear that Paz has no idea who he is. Lima politely shakes Paz's hand, his fire extinguished.

Near the end of this middle section, a visceral realist proclaims, "The search for a place to live and a place to work was the common fate of all mankind." Ulises never finds one. Neither did the man he was based on: as Bolaño notes in an essay, his old friend Mario Santiago died in a "mysterious" car crash the same year that "The Savage Detectives" was published. "When an ambulance came to pick up his body," Bolaño recalled, "nobody knew who he was and he spent several days in the morgue without anyone claiming him." Santiago's one poetry collection, "The Swan's Howl," is no longer in print.

The sense of creative atrophy that permeates "The Savage Detectives" was belied by Bolaño's own life: his literary output accelerated and deepened the closer he got to death. In the mid-eighties, he settled in Blanes, a tourist town on Spain's Costa Brava. He stopped using heroin. (A moving essay recounts his detoxification: he got his methadone dose at noon and spent the rest of the day

"Meet your sales numbers this month, Feldman, and you can have your head back."

• •

lying on the beach, crying.) He married Carolina López, a Catalonian. In 1990, the couple had a son, Lautaro, named after the Mapuche leader who resisted the Spanish conquest of Chile; they later had a daughter, Alexandra. Fatherhood changed Bolaño. Determined to make a proper living, he largely abandoned poetry, shifting to prose. In interviews, Bolaño never dwelled on the bitterness that must have attended this decision, but the tragic thrust of "The Savage Detectives" suggests that he never forgave the world for making him abandon his first love.

Bolaño began submitting short stories to state-sponsored contests around Spain; when a story won prize money, he would retitle it and submit it to another competition, which it would also win. (Similar mischief is detailed in his darkly witty story "Sensini.") When he was thirty-eight, Bolaño learned that his liver was severely compromised, and he began writing with unrelenting concentration; starting in 1996, he published one or more books a year. Despite his declining health, he could write for forty-eight hours at a stretch before collapsing. Such was his intensity, friends have recalled, that he sometimes missed medical appointments.

Compared with the sprawling "Savage Detectives," most of Bolaño's novels are impressively distilled performances; seven are under two hundred pages. Two of his best short works, "By Night in Chile" (2000) and "Distant Star" (1996), have also been published by New Directions. "By Night in Chile" may be Bolaño's most searing monologue: a Chilean priest, on his deathbed, attempts to justify a shameful past. In order to escape his impoverished background, he reveals, he joined Opus Dei, and eventually served as a tutor for General Pinochet. (There's a nauseating scene in which Pinochet coerces the priest into praising his writerly gifts: "I've published countless articles in journals . . . on all sorts of topics, but always of course related to military matters.") "Distant Star" handles similar themes, but is more surreal in tone. An ambitious Chilean poet, Carlos Wieder, comes up with a scheme for getting ahead in the Pinochet regime. He becomes a pilot in the Chilean Air Force and turns the publication of verse into a hideous military spectacle—by skywriting his latest stanzas over the Andes. Wieder's poems are incoherent, but the state applauds them as patriotic emblems of the New Chilean Poetry. A literary crime, in Bolaño's world, is the equivalent of a political crime, and Wieder, inevitably, turns out to be a murderer: two superior poets become victims of his jealousy and his knife. Wieder vanishes into exile when Pinochet falls, and, as with "The Savage De-

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tectives," this disappearance inspires a search: the narrator, a friend of the murdered poets, pieces together clues and hunts Wieder down.

Bolaño's first novels attracted critical praise but few readers; the 1998 publication of "The Savage Detectives" made him instantly famous. It aroused the same level of excitement in Latin America that "One Hundred Years of Solitude" had, three decades earlier, and won the Rómulo Gallegos Prize, the Spanish-language equivalent of the Booker Prize. Although Bolaño claimed to be embarrassed by his renown, he couldn't resist sharing his caustic—and macho—opinions in interviews and essays. (In the late nineties, he began writing a column for a Spanish newspaper.) Not since Norman Mailer had a novelist chest-thumped so entertainingly. Literature, he declared, "is the product of a strange rain of blood, sweat, semen, and tears." When asked by the Mexican edition of *Playboy* to name his favorite things, he cited "the literature of Borges" and "making love." He said that the Nobel Prize was typically won by "jerks." Bolaño played up his hippie past, claiming to have lived for years on "a diet of rice." Despite the diaspora evoked in "The Savage Detectives," he rejected the idea that his work was a "literature of exile." He wrote, "For a true writer, his only homeland is the bookstore." He still considered himself primarily a poet: "I blush less when I reread my poems."

Growing increasingly ill, he worked for five years on his final, hugely ambitious project: "2666," conceived as five discrete but linked narratives. In June, 2003, he confessed to a Spanish publication, "I'm not capable of doing the work that finishing '2666' requires. There are more than a thousand pages that I have to correct—it's a labor worthy of a nineteenth-century miner. For now, I'm going to do less taxing work. I will correct the novel after I have my liver operation. . . . I am third on the list to receive a transplant." He died a month later.

In the days before his death, Bolaño asked his editor to publish the five sections of "2666" individually, in order to secure a sizable inheritance for his children. After consultation with Bolaño's wife, the publisher issued it as a single volume. (The book, which is eleven hundred pages long, is currently being translated by Wimmer.) "2666" has hundreds of characters, but in a sense its protagonist is Santa Teresa, a town in the Sonora Desert where impoverished Mexicans labor in *maquiladoras*, the low-wage factories that have proliferated in the era of globalization. Santa Teresa is modelled on Ciudad Juárez, where, since 1993, the corpses of more than four hundred young women—many of them mutilated—have been found in garbage containers or vacant lots. (Almost none of these crimes have been solved.) In the novel, a parallel massacre has taken place. The plot of "2666" is byzantine—in a variation on "The Savage Detectives," it hinges on the hunt for a reclusive Prussian novelist who, admirers believe, has hidden himself in the Sonora Desert. But, at its core, "2666" is a testament to the unredressed evil of the murders. The fourth section, "The Part About the Crimes," offers a sickeningly comprehensive account of the killings, written in the frigid tone of a forensic report. This litany is interspliced with accounts of corrupt police officials, one of whom jokes, "Women are like laws, they were made to be violated." More than three hundred pages long, it may be the grimmest sequence in contemporary fiction.

In one of several poems that Roberto Bolaño wrote about Mario Santiago, he speaks of "the dream of our youth / the most valiant dream of all." The third and final section of "The Savage Detectives"—in which Madero's diaries seamlessly resume, on New Year's Day, 1976—has the feel of a dream. After the slow climb of the middle section, Bolaño rewards the reader with an exhilarating rush of storytelling. Lima and Belano turn out to be natural sleuths: clues about Tinajero's past are uncovered as they motor from one dusty pueblo to another. People fall in love; a second car chase ends in a climactic shoot-out. The Technicolor glory of the book's opening is restored. At the same time, the brilliance of the novel's temporal shuffling becomes clear: now that the reader knows how woeful the lives of the poets will become, their adventure in the Sonora Desert is freighted with dreadful poignancy. Madero's diaries are not the beginning of something; they are the end.

Bolaño called "The Savage Detectives" a "love letter" to his generation, but it feels more like a lament, a chronicle of dissipated potential. The novel's fetishization of lost youth verges on romanticism; a friend of Tinajero's intones, "What a shame that we die, and get old, and everything good goes galloping away from us." Outside the Madero diaries, there is only one moment in "The Savage Detectives" that documents a prolonged surge of passion. Late in the second section, Belano takes up residency in Spain. He becomes so peeved by a local book critic that a letter to the editor seems insufficient: he proposes a duel. Belano asks a friend to be his second, and the friend—a moribund fellow who is narrating this tale—is galvanized. "I felt as if someone had given me a shot in the arm," the friend writes. "First the pinprick, then the liquid going not into my veins but my muscles, an icy liquid that made me shiver. The proposition seemed crazy and unwarranted. . . . But then I thought that life (or the spectre of life) is constantly challenging us for acts we never committed, and sometimes for acts that we've never thought of committing." Belano and the critic obtain swords and agree to meet at a properly atmospheric spot: a wind-whipped beach north of Barcelona. But in Bolaño's ever-darkening universe, a tragic trajectory cannot so easily be reversed. The ensuing swordplay is "hopelessly ridiculous," the folly of men "going at it like stupid children." The decisive blow has been struck by the author.

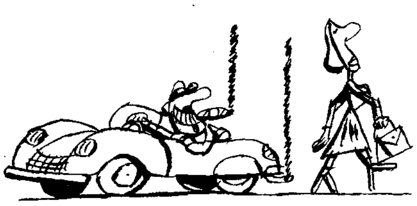
The duel sequence has the heightened dolorousness of Bolaño's best short stories. When "The Savage Detectives" was published, Ignacio Echevarría, Spain's most prominent literary critic, praised it as "the kind of novel that Borges could have written." He got it half right. Borges, whose longest work of fiction is fifteen pages, would likely have admired the way Bolaño's novel emerges from a branching tree of stories. But what would he have made of the delirious road trip, the frenzied sex, the sloppy displays of male ego? Bolaño fills his canvas with messy Lawrencian emotions but places them within a coolly cerebral frame. It's a style worthy of its own name: visceral modernism. ♦

BRIEFLY NOTED

Finn, *by Jon Clinch (Random House; $23.95)*. This harrowing début novel imagines the life of Huckleberry Finn's father, known simply as Finn, an irredeemable savage perpetually drunk on forty-rod whiskey. The son of a vitriolically racist Illinois judge, Finn subsists by running trotlines in the Mississippi and inhabits a riverside house "fit only for dying in." The plot develops from his attraction to black women, including a former slave he takes captive and has a child with. Clinch conjures the world of pre-Civil War America in all the complexity of its contradictions. While the book's females are somewhat sketchily drawn, he successfully sustains interest in a protagonist whose psychology is opaque to himself and of whom it is said, "The only way you'll ever improve him . . . is with a pistol."

Then We Came to the End, *by Joshua Ferris (Little, Brown; $23.99)*. Setting his novel in a Chicago advertising agency that has been forced to lay off workers, Ferris brilliantly captures the fishbowl quality of contemporary office life, where nothing much happens and the smallest events take on huge significance. While trying to do enough work to avoid being "shit-canned," employees play practical jokes on each other, imagine alternative career paths (rafting instructor on the Colorado, "moving to India"), and speculate wildly about their bosses' personal lives. Although the novel is somewhat baggy, the narration (done in the technically challenging first-person collective) never falters, making this a masterwork of pitch and tone, in which individual characters are less important than the general mood of boredom leavened with camaraderie.

The Father of All Things, *by Tom Bissell (Pantheon; $25)*. In 2003, Bissell travelled to Vietnam with his father, who had fought there nearly four decades before. Their relationship was uneasy: as a child, Bissell once reported his father to an abuse hotline (after an unusually physical game of rock, paper, scissors), and, at the age of twenty-nine, he still felt "diminished" in the man's presence; meanwhile, his father, only half joking, called him a Communist. In this ambitious, uneven book, Bissell chronicles their pilgrimage to former battlefields and seeks to reconcile his personal "mythology," as the son of a Vietnam veteran, with the larger context of "the only war in which the United States failed to enact its will." Bissell writes with conviction, and his prose, if sometimes swashbuckling, has moments of startling beauty. Recalling a childhood hunting trip, he describes how he wept with shock after shooting a mallard, while his father said nothing, recriminatory or consoling: "The erasure of a life—its totality—was something my father understood."



One Day a Year: 1960-2000, *by Christa Wolf, translated from the German by Lowell A. Bangerter (Europa; $16.95)*. Few writing careers have been as public as that of Wolf, East Germany's most famous writer; she was both a loyal supporter of her country and a fervent critic (watched by the Stasi and also, for a brief period early in her career, informing for it), and then became a bitter opponent of German reunification. This remarkable book offers insight into the mind behind the public figure, collecting accounts that Wolf has written over forty years describing her life on each September 27th as precisely as possible. She has noted that utopian impulses can arise "out of everyday experience rather than out of theory," and here, as the years pass and the same events recur—buying a present for a daughter whose birthday is the next day, meeting friends for dinner—we get an intimate sense of the impact of one sphere on the other. We also follow Wolf's growing disenchantment, first with what she sees as the lost promise of the German Democratic Republic, then with "today's utopia-free situation."

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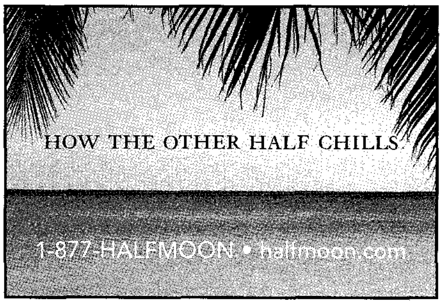
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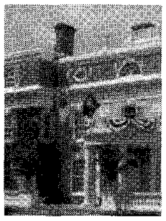
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THE THEATRE

AIR RAGE

"Talk Radio" twenty years later.

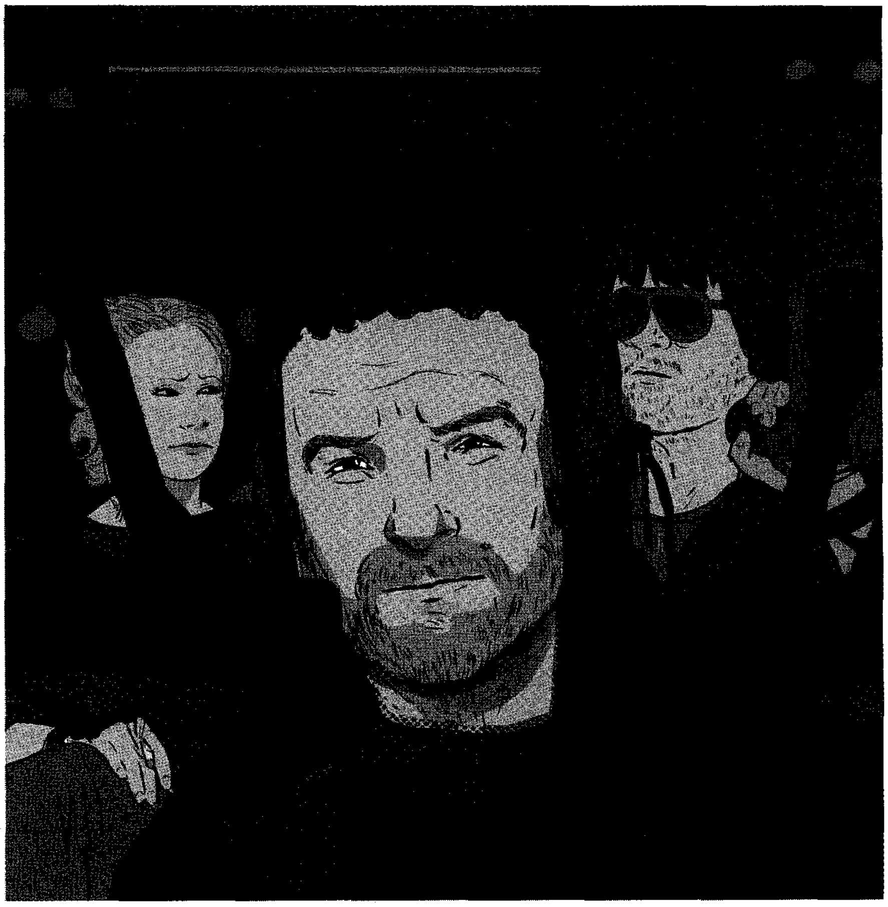
BY HILTON ALS

When it comes to artists, ambition is a tricky business. Whereas stockbrokers and politicians may labor with certain realistic goals in mind—greater riches, a Cabinet seat—artists' rewards are more elusive. The artist, possessed by the desire to perfect what can never be perfected, lives in a kind of uneasy truce with his given medium, hammering away at his blessing and his curse: his talent.

Happily for us, the thirty-nine-year-old actor and director Liev Schreiber, despite numerous successes onstage and onscreen, still seems to dwell in that anxiety-infused state of aspiration. As Naomi Watts's feckless, emotionally sleazy lover in last year's screen adaptation of Somerset Maugham's "The Painted Veil," Schreiber had a passion and a coldness that were practically clinical; the performance was a deep study in shallowness. Onstage last summer, as the star of the Public Theatre's "Macbeth," Schreiber served up not the character we've come to expect—all manly flaws and epaulettes—but an almost childlike wannabe king, with the power he craved dangling before him like a longed-for Christmas present. Though in recent years Schreiber has frequently been cast as a villain (he picked up a Tony Award for Best Actor for his performance in the 2005 revival of David Mamet's "Glengarry Glen Ross"), he is even more effective when playing the victim. As a struggling young Jewish husband in the 1999 film "A Walk on the Moon," he had a vulnerability that made viewers almost uncomfortable; unfortunately, few people want to see a grown man shed tears of hurt rather than tears of rage.

Like Meryl Streep, who helped him put a crooked spin on the mother-son scenes in Jonathan Demme's underrated 2004 remake of "The Manchurian Candidate," Schreiber has unconventional good looks. And although he works hard to make us forget them, it is his striking appearance that first grabs the audience in the current revival of Eric Bogosian's 1987 play "Talk Radio" (at the Longacre, under the direction of Robert Falls). In a dark T-shirt, jeans, and black boots, Schreiber's Barry Champlain enters the small Cleveland radio station where he is a late-night call-in-show host, carrying a cup of coffee and a lot of attitude. He's had a hell of a time driving to work. "I'm getting one of those Dirty Harry Magnums," he tells his producer, Stu Noonan (solidly played by Michael Laurence). "Next time some fucker cuts in front of me: BOOM! That's it. Or driving ten miles an hour: BOOM! Right turn from the left lane: BOOM! There should be a competency test for drivers. If they don't pass, they get shot."

It's spring, but love is the last thing on Barry's mind. His occasional girlfriend, Linda MacArthur (Stephanie March), who works at the studio, too, tells Barry that she waited for him for "a half hour last night. In the rain." Barry couldn't care less. "See, that's you," he says. "Me? I would've left." All Barry wants is to get behind the microphone. A jolly financial adviser named Sid Greenberg (the very funny Adam Sietz) is just signing off when Barry shows up. Sid has nothing in common with Barry, who, once he takes his seat, can't keep his vitriol to himself. From the start, it's clear that Barry's listeners talk too much for his taste. After all, it's *his* voice, his bile, that makes radio interesting.



Liev Schreiber as a bitter, belligerent radio host in Eric Bogosian's 1987 play.

RACHEL DOMM

Barry's first call is from a transsexual named Francine. (The excellent sound design is by Richard Woodbury.) Francine says that she's trying to save up enough money to have the operation that would change everything for her. But Barry's bored already. "You're a transsexual saving up for an operation?" he chides, talking into one of his two microphones. "You're a cliché. Call Larry King in D.C. I'll give you his toll-free number." Next call, please. And so it goes until Barry finally erupts at Stu. Why can't he put through more interesting callers? And as for those he's been listening to—well, Barry refuses to indulge in any kind of Miss Lonelyhearts sympathy shit with these freaks. They should all just suck it up. He has a show to do. Where are the interesting psychotics?

For Barry, the two microphones on his desk are no mere sound devices: they're the extra tongues he needs to lash out at the late-night losers, who cannot see, of course, that he is possibly the biggest loser of them all. While his callers may ramble and complain, at least they can say what they're feeling. Barry has plenty of language, but no words that can actually describe the pain he's in. Predictably, his emotional shortcomings are most violently expressed when anyone tries to get close to him. When Linda encourages Barry to eat, he throws the food across the studio. He claims to be angry about the way the show is going, but what he's really fuming about is Linda's attempt to care for him.

Bogosian has given Linda and Stu decent soliloquies in which they describe the love and disappointment they feel for this small-time star with a big-league neurosis, but it's Schreiber's gravel-voiced outrage that captivates us and binds all the characters together. Perhaps the only actor who doesn't seem like a supporting player here is the phenomenal Sebastian Stan, as a teen-age punk named Kent, one of Barry's callers, who tells lies on the air. When Kent shows up at the studio, it's clear that he's just a younger, less sophisticated version of Barry, hungry for attention in the station's insulated world. "You know what I'm talking about," he tells Barry. "Look at you, big star, famous guy, and you've got that fine fox right over there that works for you." Kent is high on something, and as self-absorbed as his idol. He's also a testosterone-fuelled doll, wired for violence. Pretending that his camera is a gun, he actually throws Barry for a moment. But it's just a moment. Barry is too compulsively self-possessed to crumble.

Structurally, "Talk Radio" seems somewhat indebted to Wallace Shawn's cerebral dramas about domestic cruelty: Stu's and Linda's overly literary musings are used as counterpoint to Barry's roiling wave of spite. But, unlike Shawn, Bogosian doesn't attack upper-class complacency; he's more interested in the forms that masculinity takes—and doesn't take. Although it is relatively slight, "Talk Radio," Bogosian's first theatre piece that was not a monologue, does have a certain relevance now—it's an early example of the tragedy of reality programming and of the undoing of a second-rate celebrity.

In any event, the show serves mostly as an excuse to watch Schreiber at work. Although Barry's misogynistic tone limits Schreiber, he is engaged here, once again, with the themes that seem to haunt him as a performer: how to be a man in the modern world, and how to be a man with the modern woman. Surely, given his ambition, he'll find more complex material through which to explore them.

The current revival of Robert Anderson's once shocking 1953 play about a troubled gay prep-school student, "Tea and Sympathy" (at the Clurman), is wonderfully directed by Jonathan Silverstein and, for the most part, well acted—as Laura Reynolds, the understanding wife of a homophobic housemaster, Heidi Armbruster is especially fine—but the reasons for mounting the show at all are dim. That we live in a country that is, for the most part, intolerant of difference is a given. But are there not enough young playwrights out there dying to stage new works about that difference? Do we have to keep dragging out polite works from the past that are, to say the least, dated? (The 1956 movie, with Deborah Kerr as Laura, is probably all the record of "Tea and Sympathy" we need.) Still, if you are interested in theatrical curios, by all means see it. There's another reason to see it, too: as Tom Lee, the much maligned, sensitive student whom Laura eventually falls for, Dan McCabe is singularly arresting. Using his lanky frame and often squeaky voice to convey the minefield that is adolescence, he reminds one of the early Dustin Hoffman. Alternately tentative, frightened, bewildered, and ironic, McCabe will be a star to watch for. ♦

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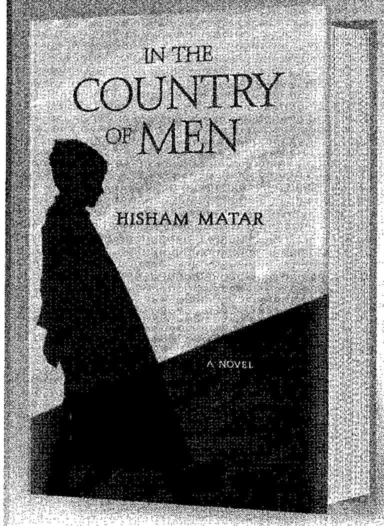

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ON TELEVISION

TRAVELLING ON

"The Riches."

BY NANCY FRANKLIN

As a performer, the British comedian and actor Eddie Izzard is a warm-blooded snake: slithery, relaxed, and projecting good will. He'll wind himself around you, but he doesn't bite; he appears to like both himself and his audiences, though he will often toy with them. In his 1999 standup film, "Dress to Kill," shot in a San Francisco theatre, he tells a joke about the pop singer Engelbert Humperdinck's name. He adds offhandedly that Humperdinck is dead but quickly waves his hands and shakes his head to indicate that he's just kidding; then he nods to indicate that he wasn't kidding. He goes back and forth like this—he's dead, no he's not—four or five times, taking the bit beyond the point of simple funniness. He's not just fooling you; he's truly confounding you. Izzard's easy charm leads you to believe everything he says at the same time that you're increasingly aware that you have no idea when he's telling the truth. You'd think that Izzard's slipperiness and his gift for wordplay and nonsense humor ("bollocks on top of more bollocks," he has called his style) make him a natural for the role of a con man, like the one he plays in the new FX show "The Riches," about a family of Travellers—Gypsy-like communities—who pull off a theft of huge proportions. But in this show Izzard doesn't quite succeed at the con of his own performance: he comes across as an actor who's been asked to play Eddie Izzard playing a part.

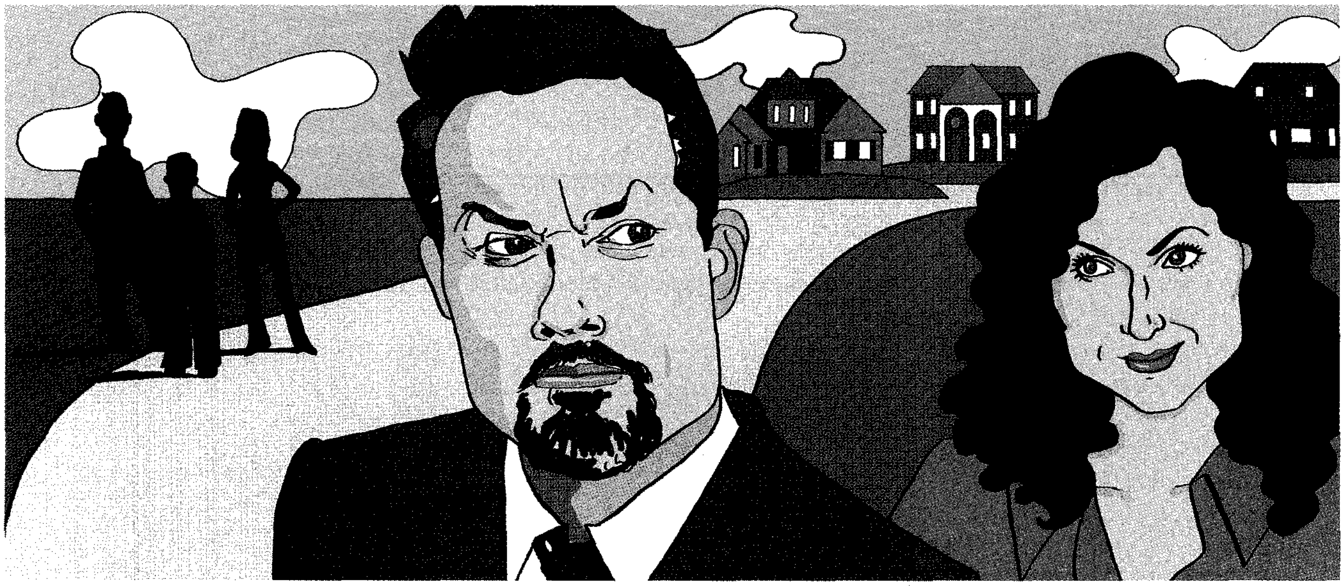
"The Riches" is the creation of Dmitry Lipkin, a playwright making his first foray into TV. (He and Izzard are also executive producers of the show, and Lipkin wrote four of the première season's thirteen episodes.) Lipkin's family moved from Russia to Baton Rouge—where some of "The Riches" is set—when he was ten, giving him firsthand experience of being an outsider in America. Yet while the ideas behind "The Riches" are often satisfyingly satirical, Izzard's role—he plays Wayne Malloy, a husband and a father of three, eager to escape the marginal life that he and his family have been living—is stagy and overblown. In the first scene of the series, Wayne infiltrates a high-school reunion, pretending to be one of the alums, for the purpose of picking pockets. (This family does its homework: Wayne's daughter preps him by quizzing him on facts from the class yearbook.) Not content to simply pick and run, Wayne gets up onstage and gives a speech about how great his class is and how great America is, saluting the classmate whose "scrap-metal business has finally come out of Chapter 11" and the "eBay PowerSeller of hand towels." He gets a big ovation, but you don't actually believe that he could win that kind of applause: his body language, his tone of voice, and the words themselves are so obviously insincere. So is it that we are watching a drama about how Americans applaud insincerity? How the American dream is all hot air? And then about halfway into the episode Wayne blows up at a young man at the Travellers' camp, whose only crime appears to be stupidity: "A hundred fifty years of suckin' off America. What you got, Ken, is a culture of nothing." So it appears that Wayne is at home neither in the world of the "buffers"—the Travellers' term for people who lead conventional lives (jobs, houses, non-fake I.D.s)—nor in the world of the Travellers. He is searching for authenticity, trying to figure out the best way to live. It's hard to know who this character is—but then maybe Lipkin's point is that Wayne doesn't know who he is, either.

Izzard's is the key role in "The Riches," but it's not the only important one. Minnie Driver plays his wife, Dahlia, who is considered royalty (and is therefore resented) in the Travellers' community, because her uncle, now dying, is its patriarch. When the series begins, she has been in prison for two years; Wayne and the kids are on the way to pick her up. If there's anything cheerily screwball about the idea of ripping off a high-school reunion and stealing wedding presents (the Malloys have a pile of them in their motor home, to give to Dahlia), Dahlia's face when we first see her shows us that there's a price to pay. Standing outside the prison fence in sweats and flip-flops, she looks raw, fragile, pretty near wrecked, and we soon find out that she's a drug addict. Driver, who's not an actress one necessarily wants to see in a recurring role—that's certainly what anyone who saw her do six episodes of "Will & Grace" a few years back would conclude—is terrific in "The Riches." For one thing, the Southern accent she's come up with is convincing, whereas Izzard's is painfully off the mark. Wayne's exact background is unclear; we're told he is half-buffer, but you can't place him by his accent. Like Hugh Laurie on "House," Izzard, in search of the right American sound, swallows his syllables and is unpleasant to listen to. It's really a shame, because normally his voice—in his standup performances and in other acting roles—is smooth and inviting.

Izzard and Driver have a hard job, but one that has to be delicious for an actor: they're playing characters who are impersonating other people. Wayne and Dahlia, along with a couple in a motor home who were trying to run them off the road, have inadvertently caused the death of an innocent couple in another car—the Riches of the title—and take the huge leap of stealing their identities. This is the rub of "The Riches." Selling the idea to his kids, Wayne, opening his arms wide to show how big their new world is going to be, says, "The American dream—we're gonna steal it." Overnight, this family of Travellers, who have led a life on the fringe, are occupying a big house in an upper-middle-class suburban development. Wayne is determined to give his family a leg up; besides, he can't resist the challenge. It's a dangerous move, because the family is also on the run from their community and from the police. They're going to have to hide in plain sight.

"The Riches" calls up a few other recent shows: "Weeds" and "Desperate Housewives," which paint a picture of the hypocrisy of suburban life (in a scene that could have been pulled from either series, Dahlia takes a plate of cookies to a neighbor in the hope of scoring some painkillers from her), and "Big Love," in which a polygamous family tries to break away from a corrupt Mormon offshoot group and live under the cover of mainstream society. Even "Deadwood" and "The Sopranos" come to mind, with their characters who embody the trade-offs, spiritual and otherwise, that come with exploiting the country's wealth. "The Riches" plays its hand a little too readily, though: the development that Wayne and Dahlia move into is called Edenfalls.

The show is hit and miss when it comes to the humor and the irony in the family's situation. Golf, the bourgiest of pastimes (a golf course itself is upwardly mobile land, striving to look perfectly groomed and respectable), is used to represent . . . the bourgiest of pastimes. "The Riches" is best when it lets the serious reveal itself through the veil of the madcap and the absurd. In one scene, Dahlia, unable to get the family's R.V. out of the pound by straightforward means, quickly regroups, using her teen-age daughter, Dehliah (Shannon Woodward), as bait: she ties Dehliah's shirttails in a knot, revealing her midriff, and sends her in. Dehliah begs brilliantly—she tells the tow-yard attendant that there's a scale model of ancient Rome in the vehicle which she needs for a school assignment and that "it's really my last chance to get a C." (No doubt she's used such tactics before and has learned that saying she'd get an A would be over the top. As a shrewd manipulator, she gets an A-plus.) The three Malloy kids have never been to school, in fact—apparently, that's just not done in the world of the Travellers. When Wayne brings up the subject in front of everyone, it makes Dahlia furious: "Would you stop scarin' 'em!" she shouts. "It will kill their tiny minds." The tactics the family use to get the kids into the best private school are lowdown and very funny—and Dahlia runs the canny maneuvers like a military operation. Whether they can maintain this new façade is one question; whether it's worth the trouble is something else. Wayne says, with confusing conviction, "I'm going to get us all the life we deserve, whether we want it or not." But the Malloys—now the Riches—may find that living in the big house isn't always that different from living in the Big House. ♦



Eddie Izzard and Minnie Driver play Wayne and Dahlia Malloy, a couple who decide to steal another family's identity.

PATRICK LONG

THE CURRENT CINEMA

LOVES LOST

"Reign Over Me" and "Premonition."

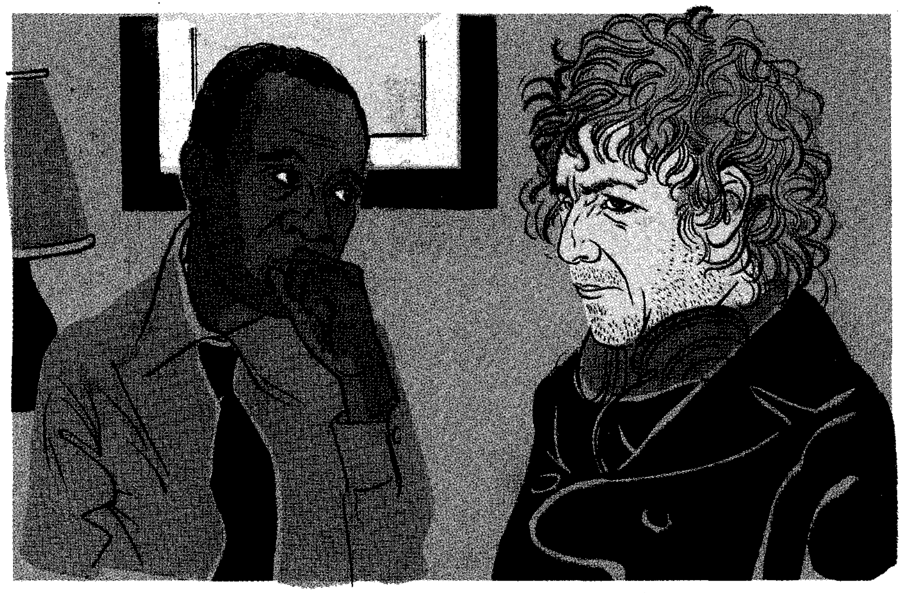
BY ANTHONY LANE

Of all the things to make you pause, hand on wallet, before shelling out for a movie ticket, try this: a film about the aftermath of 9/11, starring Adam Sandler. What possible cultural need, one might ask, could be met by such a project? It is thus with a degree of amazement that I find myself nominating "Reign Over Me," written and directed by Mike Binder, as a movie that might be worth your time.

Sandler stars as Charlie Fineman, whose existence is a wild rebuke to his name. Charlie is far from fine. He is a human heap, whining through New York on a small electric scooter, his hearing cut off by a pair of headphones the size of avocados. You might almost think he wanted to be flattened by a truck. He has sheepdog hair, graying to the color of old newsprint. For kicks, he likes to sit in his apartment and play a video game, "Shadow of the Colossus," on a huge screen. Over time, we discover the colossus in whose shadow Charlie lurks and mumbles to himself. He lost a wife and three daughters on September 11, 2001, and then he lost the capacity to admit that he had a wife and three daughters in the first place. Without the will to remember, the movie suggests, there can be no will to live.

That is an unusually gloomy proposition not just for a studio movie but for a society that, despite the acts and sites of official commemoration, must find good cause to forge ahead from catastrophe. "Reign Over Me" closes with, at best, a cautious hope, leaving us more anxious than when we went in, and throughout the film there is a stunned and bewildered air hanging over the city, like a heavy smog. The action takes place in the present day, years after the collapse of the Twin Towers, yet when Charlie's friend Alan Johnson (Don Cheadle), a dentist, runs into Angela Oakhurst (Liv Tyler), a psychiatrist who works in his building, and tries to tell her about Charlie's family, all he can say is that "they were killed in a plane crash." How far can denial spread?

It isn't only the Charlies of New York, in other words, who are stuck for words, or trapped in immovable feelings. It's the Alans, too—a curious fact, since Alan is successful, and married to the immaculate Janeane (Jada Pinkett Smith), with daughters of his own. Long ago, he was Charlie's college roommate; now he bumps into him again, and makes an effort to resuscitate him. To the movie's credit, the scheme is hardly a triumph. The moment you think that Charlie is back in the swim, he starts to thrash and splutter—laying waste to Alan's office, or foaming with anger in a coffee shop. Though Alan hooks him up with Angela, all that Charlie can do is congratulate the doctor on her breasts and, when she starts to ask about bereavement, scroll up the volume on his iPod. And yet something does seep through, as if to show that fate is not unchangeably malign: a channel-flipping Charlie stumbles on "You Were Never Lovelier," with Rita Hayworth smiling at Fred Astaire, and nearly smiles himself. Better still, he persuades Alan to hitch a ride on the back of his scooter, which leaves us with the cheery spectacle of two grown men, standing bolt upright like shop dummies, zipping along to the strains of the Pretenders. "Stop all your sobbing," Chrissie Hynde tells us, with that imploring crack in her voice, but the movie treads haltingly, as if to reply, Not yet.



Don Cheadle and Adam Sandler in a new movie by Mike Binder.

EDEL RODRIGUEZ

All the relationships in "Reign Over Me" are either busted or badly in need of repair. There is Alan's marriage, which is seizing up; there is his professional flirtation with Angela (he wants therapy but daren't ask for it); and there is the other sort of flirting, not so much professional as pornographic, which is launched in his direction by Donna Remar (Saffron Burrows), a dental patient of surpassing beauty and unsound mind. I didn't quite believe in her pursuit of Alan, and it soon becomes clear that the main weakness of Binder's movie is its approach to women, which veers between the idolatrous and the petrified. By the end, Charlie's plight has won the sympathy not just of Angela but of Donna, at which point my thoughts drifted into the heretical: tragedy is tragedy, but, if Liv Tyler *and* Saffron Burrows are tending to your needs, might life not be getting a little brighter?

These implausibilities may jolt the movie, but they don't derail it, because they run in line with Binder's vision of a fractious, off-kilter world. Back in 1990, Binder wrote a fine and underrated film called "Coupe de Ville," about three bickering brothers; it was, incidentally, almost womanless, but it proved that he had an ear for the snap and swerve of argument—still well tuned in "Reign Over Me," and matched by the eye of Russ Alsobrook, his director of photography. Alsobrook works in high-definition digital to rid the city of serenity: everything is haste and jumble, with pleasure being grabbed and lost on the run, and the long, nocturnal streets promising more desolation than romance. Even Don Cheadle, classy and controlled as he is, gets thrown back onto his nerves, and his striving to keep himself together, though far less anguished than Charlie's, is somehow the meat of the film. Which leaves us with Adam Sandler. I cannot remember laughing at a single scene of his comedies, but here, for once, his chosen persona—the slurring and disconnected goofball—makes sense, although I still think of him as an oddly hollow presence on which to build a movie. His grief is less convincing than his vacancy, and one effect of "Reign Over Me" is to make you ask, Who will improve on Sandler? Who can do for New York, in the wake of 9/11, what the young Scorsese, De Niro, and Keitel did for the city in earlier years, and under less threatening skies?

The new Sandra Bullock film, "Premonition," is about a wife and mother who foresees that her husband is about to die. Then he dies. Why is it, in movies, that people with clairvoyant powers see only the dire and dangerous things that will befall them? If you can predict a death, why not the winner of the Belmont Stakes, so that you can amble down to the bookies before the beginning of June? No such luck for Bullock's character, Linda Hanson, who looks fairly stressed even before the premonitions kick in. She is married to Jim (Julian McMahon), she has two adoring daughters, but does she look happy? No, she looks like someone posing for Edvard Munch.

This is bizarre, given that Bullock is one of the few leading ladies—Meg Ryan having temporarily vanished into the mists—who know how to carry a comedy, and to make that difficult burden seem as light as a kite. She has always been a frowner and a fretter, but in movies past, beginning with "Speed," those worry lines could be erased with ease; they were part of her quick-response skills, and of her determination to ride the bumps of mischance. The first sin committed by Mennan Yapo, the director of "Premonition," is that he manages to make his heroine's face look at once drawn and swollen, as if the sight of a pretty woman might, like a dirty joke, inflict frivolous damage on the drama. Tell that to Carole Lombard. Or Myrna Loy.

The chronology is all chewed up, with Linda waking the day after the funeral to learn that Jim is still alive, then waking again to find the opposite, and so on. It might have been simpler to call the movie "Groundhog Death." Slowly, a plot emerges. Just as the two daughters are seen, early on, carefully putting pieces into a jigsaw puzzle—well, now their mom has to *solve a puzzle of her own*. ("Reign Over Me" pulls an almost identical trick. I live for these delicate hints.) Linda discovers, thanks to her Sibylline gift, that Jim is about to sneak off with a colleague named Claire (Amber Valletta), and that it is en route to the tryst that he will crash and burn. According to Linda, "Maybe it was supposed to happen. Even though he didn't do anything yet, maybe it was enough that he was going to." This was a new one to me: "Minority Report" for the lustful. In short, the moral of "Premonition" is that you can expect to be killed for wanting to sleep with Amber Valletta. According to my calculations, this means that ten million Americans will die by tomorrow morning, half of them in the shower.

Call it dark, call it spooky, but somehow I knew that "Premonition" would be a stinker. Was it a dream, or did I really foresee that Kate Nelligan would be wasted in the role of Linda's mother? Or that the name of Peter Stormare in the opening credits meant that at least one of the characters would be a menacing fruitcake? Scoff if you will, but such coincidences cannot be swept aside. Listen to Linda's minister, who happens to have a book of famous premonitions at hand when she drops by, its weirder passages marked with yellow stickies. People who have lost their faith, he says, are "empty vessels," waiting to be filled with ungodly, prophetic talents such as hers. So there you have it: go to church, keep your husband's gaze averted from stray blondes, try not to think about the future, and all shall be well. Although "Premonition" is not a frightening movie, it is aimed squarely at an audience of frightened souls. ♦

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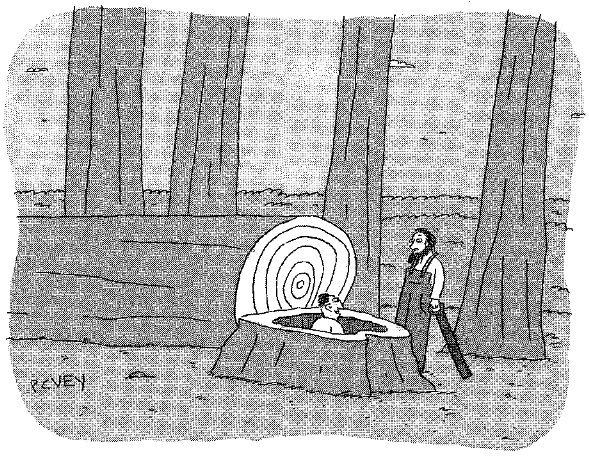
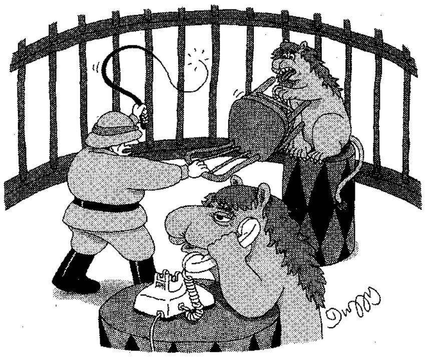
CARTOON CAPTION CONTEST

Each week, we provide a cartoon in need of a caption. You, the reader, submit a caption, we choose three finalists, and you vote for your favorite. Caption submissions for this week's cartoon, by Frank Cotham, must be received by Sunday, March 25th. Finalists in the March 12th contest appear below; go online to vote. We will announce the winner, along with the finalists in this week's contest, in the April 9th issue. The winner will be given a signed print of the cartoon. Any U.S. resident age eighteen or over can enter or vote. To do so, and to read the complete rules, visit www.newyorker.com/captioncontest.

THE WINNING CAPTION



"Next time, just knock."
Sara Curcio, Glastonbury, Conn.



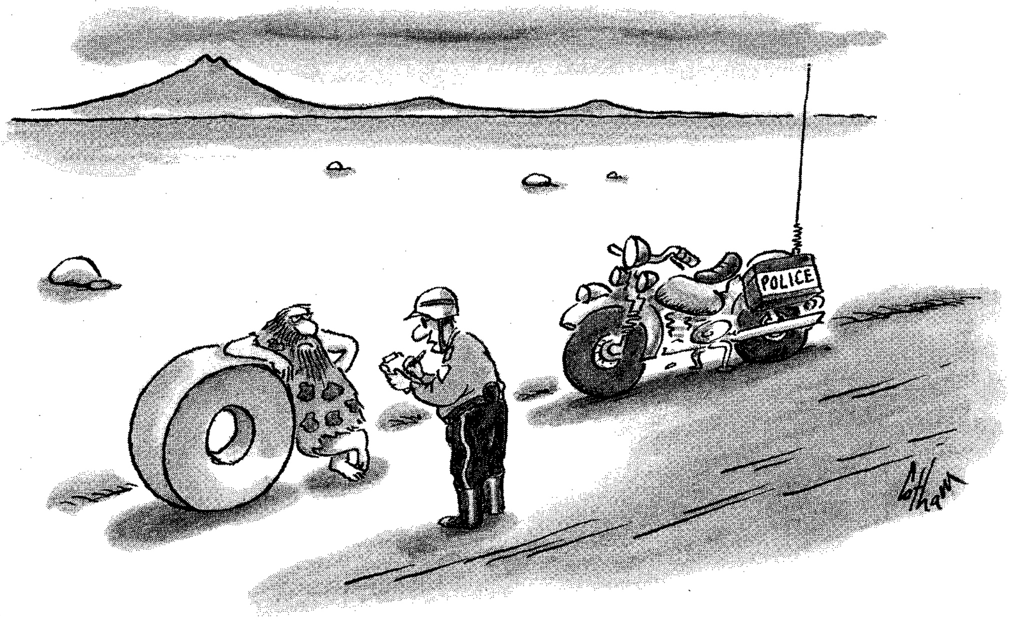
THE FINALISTS

"How many times do I have to tell you, don't call me at work!"
Chris Weaver, Kelsey, Calif.

"I keep telling him, 'For God's sake, put down the whip, she has a learning disability.'"
Bobby Gruenberg, Ann Arbor, Mich.

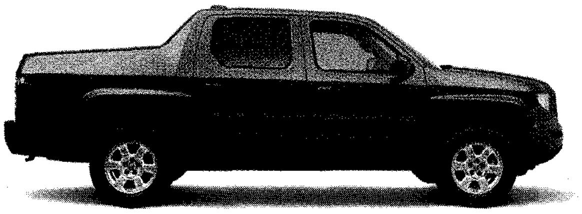
"Yeah, I know. But who changes careers at my age?"
Joe Blevins, Arlington Heights, Ill.

THIS WEEK'S CONTEST



“ ”

When it comes to safety, you shouldn't have to choose.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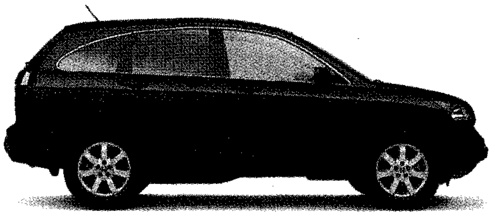
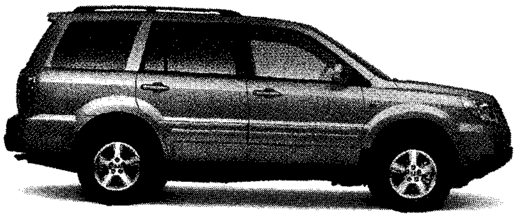
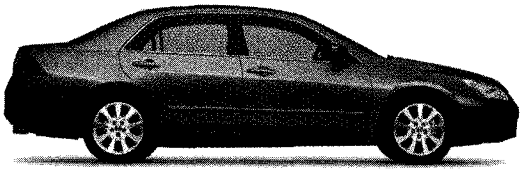
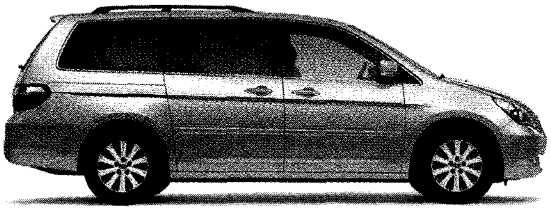
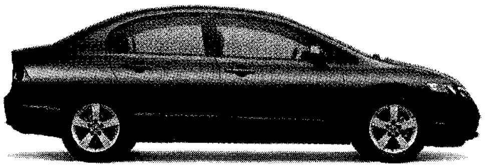
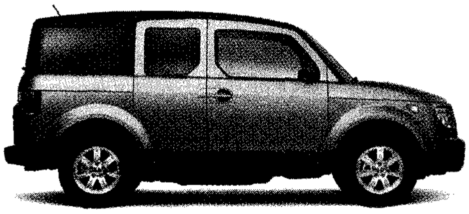

The CR-V


The Pilot


The Accord Sedan


The Odyssey


The Civic Sedan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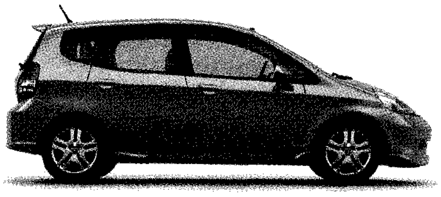
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The Power of Dreams

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